

to do with the text, is going on invisibly while we read, for the man behind the personae is getting older page by page, year by year, in a world not of narrative but of real time, or rather perhaps of both: older, but also wiser, defter, cleverer simply, so that two processes coexist and coalesce, one reflecting the complexities of reader-controlled art, the other the inescapable processes of nature, the roll-call of the real dead, Robin Buckingham, Lily, Virginia, T. E. and D. H.—a process over which the reader is powerless, able only to glance uneasily at dates as he gets towards the end of the second volume. It is appropriate that the last letter selected here should be to May, devoted wife of Bob Buckingham and devoted friend, in whose house in Coventry, a few months after this, he died:

"Silence cannot mean peace. Send me a line (All right here)."

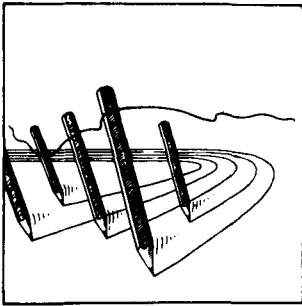
Pondering this enigmatic message (cry for attention?), which somehow seems so fitting a conclusion to these volumes, I found myself recalling some words from *A Passage to India*—"the perfectly adjusted organism would be silent." I looked the passage up (it is the beginning of Chapter XIV) and read this:

"Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence. Inside its cocoon of work or social obligation, the human spirit slumbers for the most part, registering the distinction between pleasure and pain, but not nearly as alert as we pretend. There are periods in the most thrilling day during which nothing happens, and though we continue to exclaim: 'I do enjoy myself,' or, 'I am horrified,' we are insincere. 'As far as I feel anything, it is enjoyment, horror'—it's no more than that really, and a perfectly adjusted organism would be silent."

Forster's letters seem to proclaim the contrary: that nothing in life is so dull that it cannot be made interesting by writing well about it, and that "silence cannot mean peace" unless it be the silence of the grave. We are grateful that the imperfectly adjusted organism called E. M. Forster went on talking and joking and confiding and entertaining until the end. Perhaps in this achievement of the human spirit the Yeatsian dilemma, "perfection of the life or of the work", is happily resolved.

Down Under with Waltzing Jane

Australia in Fiction—By D. J. TAYLOR



"**P**RAY REMEMBER", says a colonial pundit somewhere in *Jane Austen in Australia*, "that we are but a young country." You might think—for all that the author is intent upon one of those exercises in the historical subjunctive and hence entitled to latitude—that this is a little contrived, a

small piece of self-consciousness over which the author and reader can exchange a wink. Yet meaningful remarks are strewn about the pages of all these books with deliberate artlessness. "No real mystery can be solved", reckons Darcy Burr in *The Doubleman*, while Herbert Badgery, the hero of *Illywhacker*, will feed you his opinions on truth and lies, reality and subterfuge, at the drop of a hat. After all, "it was no trouble to lie." No. This sort of revelation, symbolic games being given away, is quite deliberate. It is a hint in code to the reader, requiring only his own decoding, a warning about the likelihood of artifice and dissimulation. Forewarned, forearmed, we stride on into the text.

The gleeful acceptance of artifice is a central force at work in the modern novel. More advanced forms of critical theory demand that each book exist as its own meta-text, ceaselessly

commenting on its own preoccupations and resolves, turning in on itself to demonstrate symbols and inconsistencies. This trickiness, this feeling that you have broken in on the author's private codes, risen to a higher level of interpretation than he or she anticipated, can be stimulating. It can also make you pine for the staid satisfactions of pace and narrative; an assumption that the author, like you, is waiting breathlessly to see what will happen to his characters. Frequently in these modern fictions, assembled with nods in the direction of Derrida and the Yale critical school, the author is nothing much more than a puppetmaster who, masochistically, wants you to see the strings.

Australian fiction was always a likely candidate for this approach. Historical circumstance demands it. Peter Carey quotes as his epigraph remarks by Mark Twain on the confusing and downright implausible nature of much Australian history: presumably this can be taken as a defence of his own method, which is to write equally fanciful fiction. You can't after all, truthfully explain the inexplicable. Possibly these intentions have something to do with the current modishness of the Australian novel, a slap to insular sensibilities which thought that it began and ended with Patrick White. Other home-grown stars—Frank Moorhouse, for instance, who combined scrupulous realism with the odd stylistic flourish—never progressed beyond cult acceptance in this country. It would be difficult to describe any of these

books as “realistic”, such is the degree of resolute self-questioning. Here, as so often nowadays, you are in the realm of fable.

The fabulist at the centre of Peter Carey’s *Illywhacker*¹ is 139-year-old Herbert Badgery, found reminiscing about a specious and eventful life. “Illywhacker” is demotic for confidence-man, a role Badgery gaily entertains from the moment in 1919 when his Morris Farman lands at Balliary East and introduces him to the entrancing Phoebe McGrath. A brief married idyll ends upon her elopement with Horace, the travelling poet. The novel then fast-forwards to 1931 when Badgery, seven years on the road with his precocious offspring, encounters Leah Goldstein, a dancer of obstinate virtue attempting to support her maimed husband. These are the tornado years. As Badgery and Goldstein Theatricals they traverse the 1930s “like flies on the face of a great painting” until Leah returns to her husband, while Badgery, his world falling apart, revisits his childhood mentor, the scrutable Goon Tse Ying, and abstracts his magical *Book Of the Dragon*.

With Herbert sentenced to ten years in Rankin Downs gaol, the novel’s focus switches to 17-year-old Charles, “Snake Boy Badgery”, and his role in the Great Victoria Mouse Plague. Deaf, cretinous, but likeable, he marries Emma, a teacher rescued from the saurian clutches of a Gould’s Monitor. Charles and Emma establish a pet-shop in Sydney and everything prospers until the dreadful afternoon when Emma imagines that Charles has enlisted for war, and the lizard, blithely stepping to freedom from its cage, has a leg excised by an excited fox-terrier. It is a symbolic incident. Emma retreats into the cage and resists extraction, and in a period coincident with Herbert’s return the fortunes of the Badgery family, *quondam* owners of the world’s greatest pet emporium, go into irreversible decline.

THIS IS ONLY the most restrained summary of a vast, diffuse plot chock-full of luminous characters and incident, in whose arbitrary nature it is possible to detect unflinching ulterior motive. “Illywhacker” is Carey’s metaphor for fiction, “a trickster, a ripperty man, a conman”—on one level the book can be interpreted as a debate about truth and the novel. Badgery contends that lies enliven. “You call it a lie. I call it a gift.”

True or not (an irrelevant distinction, possibly), *Illywhacker* is a masterpiece of comic invention, a ragbag of unfocused events given connection and design by symbolic coat-pegs negligently distributed through the text: the snake, for instance, which makes a pivotal appearance early on. Badgery, determined to impress Phoebe, tells her that it’s a pet, a deceit from which much ensues: making the point that in a fictional context lies can be fruitful. This is a comic novel, and something more. Rereading establishes the fact that Carey has constructed his narrative with beguiling artfulness, confronting the reader on the one hand with a sensation of stories falling off trees on either side of the path, each demanding investigation and comment, on the other a

sneaky, manipulative continuity, a panoramic awareness of past and future contingency.

Carey’s language is as enterprising as that of the stories contained in *The Fat Man In History*. An umbrella attack on Badgery’s Morris Farman does no more damage than “a knife in water”; an old man’s skin hangs from his arm “like a roast chicken wing.” Form and content, dextrously interwoven, contrive to illumine an entire country. Watching Badgery’s dealings with his canny, assured countrymen, noting his complaint that “the country is full of bloody salesmen”, we can also speculate that “Illywhacker” is a metaphor for the Australian past. Traditionalists might deplore the obvious contrivance but *Illywhacker* is a dazzling and hilarious book.

PROFESSOR KARL MILLER has written on C. J. Koch’s *The Doubleman*² in *The London Review of Books*, defining it as a text of romantic dualism. A more prosaic approach seems in order. Fatherless and crippled by polio, Richard Miller (on reflection one can forgive the Professor’s insistence on the Manichean order of things) is growing up in post-war Tasmania. Paralysis is crucial in his introduction to the allegorical sub-world which the book extrapolates. Flat on his back, living life at one remove, he notes that “it was now that my interest in the other world began.” This interest is reinforced by his encounter with the mysterious Broderick, a sort of Magus figure, who has a sinister familiar named Darcy Burr and who teaches Richard’s cousin Brian to play the guitar. But Richard, after a sexual initiation at the hand of unfathomable Deirdre Brennan, decamps to Sydney in the hope of becoming an actor.

It is at this point that the book begins to lurch towards its disconcerting conclusion. Darcy and Brian reappear as Thomas and The Rhymers, a quaint folksy ensemble whose lyrics preach the occultism that enlivened Miller’s childhood. And not just occultism. Among the tribe of hobmen, water sprites, bogles and various other fauna of the supernatural, there arises the notion of dualism. “Faery’s double”, Darcy tells Richard, and indeed reflection assures you that the book contains two of everyone, even Deirdre, whose death—and the splitting up of the group (rock groups are by nature fissiparous)—is the novel’s finale.

Again the reader is enmeshed in a web of actuality and illusion, of things not being what they seem. The metaphor is music. “In complex music the melodies aren’t there at the beginning just for what they are.” Apparently not. The quest—for meaning, for one’s true associates—is pervasive. “I can always find y’ Dick” says Darcy, “there’s nothing easier than finding people.” I smell Jung. One’s first reaction is to assume that this is meretricious tosh, but that would be to deny the book’s obvious merit. It is an axiom that within every novel of ideas there is a decent realist fiction screaming to get out. In *The Doubleman* one can detect an interesting novel deflected from its proper path by this accretion of Darcy Burr’s “ghost music”, the story of a lonely adolescent, proceeding to struggling actor—amid the mincing old queens of the ABS drama department—finding fulfilment in success and marriage to Katrin. Mr Koch is capable of conjuring up

¹ *Illywhacker*. By PETER CAREY. Faber, £9.95.

² *The Doubleman*. By C. J. KOCH. Chatto & Windus, £8.95.

sharp and ineradicable images, ranging in a few words over *Mitteleuropa*, when describing Katrin's ancestry, manifesting a keen awareness of the passing of time, a sense of people's lives slipping away, of youthful promise inadequately fulfilled. There is an oddly old-fashioned air hanging over *The Doubleman*. It is very much a book of the 1960s. Dope, tinsel, and misplaced enthusiasm combine to remind one what dull, fatuous years they were.

NO DOUBT IT IS unfair to consider Barbara Ker Wilson in the same breath as Koch and Carey. Her aims are much more modest, though her execution of them is not despicable. Yet here is a further exercise in unreality, albeit belonging to a distinct and definable genre—the historical might-have-been. There have been a number of these books recently. T. C. Boyle's *Water Music*, which examined the career of Mungo Park, was a notably frothy example. The problem with what we might describe as exercises in the historical subjunctive is that they require the unforced suspension of belief. A self-conscious narrator, deliberately nudging the reader's sense of actuality, is death to a book about real people performing non-existent actions. *Jane Austen in Australia*³ has its roots in history—the arrest and escape from deportation of an Austen aunt—but very little else. Uncle James Leigh-Perrott, having read up on the Antipodes in anticipation, resolves to undertake a pleasure trip. Jane, recovering from the apparent death of an admirer, journeys with them as a companion to her aunt. Predictably the visit, seeing that it never happened, is somewhat purposeless save that Jane conducts one or two discreet flirtations and, implausibly, meets her old flame—rumours of whose death were, as they say, greatly exaggerated.

On a moderate level this succeeds very agreeably. Jane has a pretty wit and the narrator allows herself some choice epigrams, remarking of the newly-wed Strongbows, "as if the novelty of marriage were not sufficient they intended to take up land in the colony and settle." However, the author (as is usual with this sort of thing) is unable to avoid a certain staginess. There are two perspectives at work here, the author's and that of her faked contemporary persona. Inevitably one perspective occasionally thwarts the other by anachronisms of phrase and place. It is contextually unfeasible to refer to a character as "mentally defective" or a continent as "undiscovered" (how can she *know*?). Rather in the same way, background details are too obviously worked into the main body of the text. When a servant unleashes a volley of authentic contemporary slang the effect is not plausibility but simply a realisation that the author has boned up on her social history. This is not one of those historical novels in which the *dramatis personae* storm around yelling "I faith, thou saucy varlet", but the attempts at verisimilitude are a shade overdone.

These are minor quibbles. After all, not everybody is George Macdonald Fraser, whose *Flashman* novels—combining absolute authenticity with a casual acceptance of

³ *Jane Austen in Australia*. By BARBARA KER WILSON. Secker & Warburg, £8.95.

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historical detail—represent the *ne plus ultra* of this particular genre. Naturally the colonial chapters, benefiting from the novelty of scene and incident, are the most convincing. Australia is presented as a ghastly parody of English society, a world in which the Governor is “not quite a gentleman” (Aunt Perrott swoops like a hawk on social shortcomings), Judge Advocates are carried away drunk to their carriages and young women subjected to the dreadful immorality of waltzing. What does Jane make of this? Very little, apart

from a few tart remarks. From time to time she stumbles across copy fodder—despite the absence in her books of any character or incident drawn from life. There is even a Mr Wentworth whose name “might very well be mentioned” in the next novel. There is also Mr Crabtree, the sub-Wordsworthian versifier whose butterfly poems are quite properly made fun of. The whole farrago diverts and entertains and is a welcome antidote to less innocent essays in fictional artifice.

Et in Arcadia Ego

Demons in Neverland—By ROGER LEWIS



SUICIDES, RAPES, molestations, kinkynesses: the secret garden of *Secret Gardens*¹ is hardly an arcadia. What Humphrey Carpenter chronicles as the Golden Age of children's literature is, in fact, an arcade of sexual and emotional hurts. The charmed grove has a tangled and lubricious undergrowth—presided over by the cocky Peter Pan. Discussing the popular Victorian and Ed-

wardian scribes who have bequeathed to us their sentimental visions, what Carpenter has trespassed upon (though he is not disposed fully to explore it) is an intimation of that late 19th-century invention: the unconscious. George MacDonald, reader of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Friedrich von Hardenberg, commented that fairy tales seemed like “narratives without coherence but . . . with associations like dreams.” While England was landscaping its Neverlands, in Vienna psychoanalysis was being developed.

The idea of the mind as a dark forest of recondite symbols, a salad of wish-fulfilment and fictionalised memory, Freud spent a career examining; writers of children's literature spent careers providing covert case-histories. Freud was a therapist; writing children's literature is therapeutic—the form has, said MacDonald, “allegorical meaning in general, and an indirect effect like music.” By passing off their tales as jottings for the nursery, artists could investigate their own mental experiences; pretending to entertain the innocent, they explored their own pleasure principles. The aquatic paradise of *The Water Babies*, for instance, was written by a man who told his wife, in high excitement, that he rose at night and “went into the woods . . . and lay naked upon thorns and when I came home my body was torn from head to foot.” Charles Kingsley also composed *billets-doux* about copulation

on crosses, transfixed nuns, priapic monks. He wanted Fanny Grenfell to preserve chastity for a moon after marriage, so that she will be his “virgin bride, a sister only.” Fantasies about sibling incest are a recurring theme in 19th-century art, from Byron to an apotheosis in Wagner: “*Braut und Schwester bist du dem Bruder*”, sings Siegmund to Sieglinde.

The Water Babies is a dream of death. The besmirched sweep, lustrated, wriggles free for post-mortem adventures as a slippery spirit. Alice, too, tours a wonderland which could be regarded as discarnate, posthumous. She falls down the rabbit-hole into the recesses of the earth; there, she grows and shrinks, “shutting up like a telescope”, as Milton's Satan does in Pandemonium. Carroll, ruler of her universe, is Mr Hyde to Dodgson's Dr Jekyll. Doubles, as Carpenter says, pervade the *Alice* books: the Duchess and the Queen of Hearts; Tweedledum and Tweedledee; Logic and Nonsense; the looking-glass, which duplicates and distorts the world of those who look into it. In reality, however, it is Dodgson who is the sinister extension of the meek fabulist Carroll. He practised photography, Carpenter claims, “largely because it gave him a respectable way of picking up little girls.” Alice Liddell, the most renowned lulu, daughter to the Dean of Christ Church, was but one of a horde. She was not the exclusive inspiration for her namesake. *Alice*, Dodgson told Tenniel, “has been read and liked by so many children.” Reciting stories joined shutter-bugging as a procurative ploy. Dean Liddell penetrated the ruses. Leaves from Dodgson's diary for June 1863 are suspiciously missing. During that month he'd travelled alone with Lorina, Alice and Edith. What surreptitiousness occurred? There was a breach between the mathematics don and the Liddells afterwards.

Dodgson, it is argued, lusted after babes (he lost interest in his elvish pals once they reached puberty); Freud's discovery was that babes have lusts. The suckling at the breast is learning about sensation. Mother is the first lover. George MacDonald, a friend of Dodgson, whose work is haunted by the presence of his dead mother, in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* betrays a morbid curiosity about pain and torture. His bright-eyed infant heroes and heroines dispense punishments gleefully to malefactors. “The terrors of the imagination”, he says, “were fast yielding to those of sensuous experience.”

¹ *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature*. By HUMPHREY CARPENTER. Allen & Unwin, £12.95.