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1987

Our cup runneth over

Life-stories from Fremantle go national

Per Henningsgaard

Fremantle was a busy place in the lead-up to 1987. Four years earlier, an Australian yachting syndicate skippered by John Bertrand, bankrolled by Perth businessman Alan Bond, and armed with a secret weapon – the controversial winged keel – had wrenched the America’s Cup away from the New York Yacht Club, where the trophy had, until then, resided for an unbroken 132-year stint. A nation that reserved most of its sporting attention for cricket and various football codes was momentarily enthralled by this historic win. The Prime Minister of the day was memorably recorded on television declaring an unofficial public holiday: “Any boss who sacks anyone for not turning up today is a bum,” Bob Hawke eloquently proclaimed. (Hawke had a personal appreciation for record-breaking feats: he boasted a world speed record in beer drinking as a university student). Quickly, sleepy Fremantle, a port town in Western Australia not far from Perth and better known for its well-heeled hippies and stevedores than yachting prowess, found itself at the centre of massive infrastructure projects funded by government and private sources. Following Fremantle’s lead, the State itself was rebranded. Vehicle registration plates no longer incongruously decreed it “The Wildflower State” and “The State of Excitement.” Instead, Western Australia was declared “Home of the America’s Cup.” It was a heady claim that could be made for a short time only; the Cup was lost in 1987 when “Stars and Stripes 87” trounced “Kookaburra III.”

Fremantle’s status as the address of the America’s Cup was fleeting, and with it vanished the port town’s claim to have originated a story big enough to capture the nation’s imagination and alter the State’s image. As luck would have it, however, in the same year that the America’s Cup was lost, Fremantle spawned another narrative that would grip the nation:

Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987). Morgan's book emerged under the banner of the independent publisher Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP). The Press was established in the mid-1970s with a particular, regional brief: to publish writing by Western Australian authors. While many of the Press' authors, including Elizabeth Jolley, Nicholas Hasluck, T.A.G. Hungerford, and Peter Cowan, had produced works that enjoyed national prominence, Morgan's book was almost immediately recognised as a significant milestone in Indigenous writing and Australian history. *My Place* is a memoir (or, more accurately, an autobiography and biography in which many voices speak) that tells of Morgan's determination to uncover her family's origins. Raised in suburban Perth during the 1950s and 1960s, believing that a distant Indian relative accounted for her slightly dark skin colouring, Morgan was 15-years old when the truth came out: she and her four siblings were of Aboriginal descent. In spite of her grandmother's reluctance to share the family's story, *My Place* sees Morgan gradually assemble an impressive roster of oral histories from other relatives. Finally, after much persuasion, her grandmother relents and describes the suffering of the Stolen Generations that would be told in another form with the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report a decade later in 1997. Indeed, its early treatment of the topic of the Stolen Generations is what established *My Place* as a significant milestone in Indigenous writing and Australian history. This situation is so even as some have criticised *My Place* for, in Mudrooroo Narogin's words, "being written to conform to the dictates of the marketplace." The book has also been taken to task for not more aggressively challenging white, mainstream perceptions of Aboriginality and Aboriginal Australians.

Of course, the poetry of Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) was a crucial precursor in the wider Australian book market for Indigenous writing. However, this market expanded dramatically during the 1980s as specialised small publishers including FACP came to support Indigenous life-writing. For example, in the same year that *My Place* was published, Magabala Books, the publishing arm of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre in the northwest corner of Western Australia, released Glenyse Ward's autobiographical *Wandering Girl* as its second title; the book sold out its first print run in ten days. A number of Indigenous life-writers, including Margaret Tucker, Alexis Wright, Ruby Langford Ginibi, and Kim Scott, have followed, despite what Robin Freeman recognises as "the difficulties experienced by writers and editors negotiating the problematic territory that straddles the realisation of the author's intentions and the publisher's commercial agenda."

The shared publication dates, narrative forms, and interests make *My Place* and *Wandering Girl* an obvious pairing that sits intriguingly alongside narratives of national pride swirling around the America's Cup victory and defense. In contrast, A.B. Facey's memoir, *A Fortunate Life* (1981), also published (prior to the yachting extravaganza) by FACP, would seem an unlikely intrusion on the reflections here on regional indigenous life-writing and its national resonances. After all, Facey's memoir is of the classic white Aussie battler growing up in the early part of the twentieth century. Facey was born in Maidstone, Victoria, in 1894, and the family soon moved to Western Australia where his father died on the Goldfields when Facey was two. Facey taught himself how to read and write in the absence of formal schooling, was engaged in hard labour from an early age, worked as a bushman and a boxer, and fought at Gallipoli during World War I, in the course of which he was wounded and his two brothers killed. He later fell in love, got married, raised a family in rural Western Australia through some challenging periods including the Depression, and lost a son – one of seven children – in World War II.

Clearly, *My Place* and *A Fortunate Life* tell very different stories about place, identity, and Australia. *My Place* relates the story of Australia's Stolen Generations and its ongoing effects and consequences for subsequent generations. Morgan's book struck a very different note to the energetic nationalism circulating around the America's Cup races during the mid-1980s. *A Fortunate Life*, on the other hand, is notable for its nostalgic and overwhelmingly affirmative sense of Australian nationalism, replete with just about every Australian type imaginable – the digger, the mate, the bushman, the larrikin, and the battler – all rolled up into a single extremely likeable old man. Yet, as coupled memoirs, as they are here, the content and reception of these two books is telling. After all, they were published in the lengthy period of national introspection that preceded the 1988 bicentenary of Australia's European colonisation. And as publishing veteran and manager of FACP Ray Coffey says of this timing, "In the lead-up to that there was, quite properly, an increased interest in our own narratives, our own stories." Many publishers and arts organisations around the country were raking in extra funding from the National Office and the State Council of the Australian Bicentennial Authority for bicentenary-related projects, and readers seemed to be receptive to stories that spoke to their understanding of the nation. Consequently, this period saw the publication of a remarkable number of memoirs explicitly concerned with Australian themes. Many of these achieved wide readerships, including Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from*

Coorain (1989), David Malouf's *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1986). Arguably, *A Fortunate Life* was perfectly suited to the nationalistic sentiment of the bicentennial years, while *My Place* appealed to those who were uncomfortable with the more fervent displays of Anglo-masculine Australian identity – seemingly a sizeable proportion of the population of both genders – and made space for an Indigenous female voice.

Strangely enough, however, the seemingly unlike books by Morgan and Facey have been criticised for being too akin. This reproach is attributable to the fact that *My Place* and *A Fortunate Life* share certain stylistic similarities, which are attributable, in turn, to their similar publishing circumstances. Not only did FACP publish both books; they were both initially presented to the publisher in an incomplete state. Facey's manuscript, in particular, was partly typed, partly handwritten, and almost completely lacking punctuation. Morgan's manuscript came to the publishing house in bits and pieces over a period of several years. Consequently, these manuscripts required long gestational periods with FACP's editors. The books that resulted from these documents were therefore collaborations between the authors and staff at FACP, and their stylistic similarities have been interpreted by some as evidence of both insufficient subjectivity and a lack of historical objectivity.

The historian Keith Windschuttle, for example, has taken Morgan to task for what he sees as her fabrication of her family history, especially those bits relating to the Stolen Generations. In the course of this criticism, Windschuttle describes a small portion of Morgan's book – the transcription of an oral history by Morgan's relative Arthur Corunna – in the following manner: "His story of his later life as bush worker and farmer bears an uncanny resemblance, in both tone and content, to the text of the publisher's earlier best-seller, *A Fortunate Life*." Windschuttle clearly implies that any similarities between the two books are the result of their shared publishing history – without acknowledging the possibility that these similarities might just be the result of any number of other factors, including that both books are memoirs. Certainly, Windschuttle's explanation appears to ignore the possibility that the figures described in these two books might actually have had some parallel life experiences, despite their racial differences. Windschuttle also writes of Facey's book, "Although most readers took it to be the authentic autobiography of Facey, told in his own voice, it was actually a carefully crafted literary artifice." Here we see a suggestion that editorial interventions are inappropriate if not downright immoral; to edit

a memoir for more than spelling and punctuation is to meddle with the otherwise assumed unmediated experience of the writer. This is not writing “straight from the heart,” which is what critic Ben Yagoda insists readers of memoir value at the expense of expertise and objectivity.

Of course, literary artifice often goes by another name: fiction. Mark Davis has identified an apparent “decline of the literary paradigm” in Australian literature – that is, a decrease in interest in high-brow or literary fiction – since some time in the late 1960s and picking up speed in the early 1990s. One of the roots of this decline, if it is to be believed, might well be the growing attention paid to memoir, which Coffey identified in an interview in 2006: “What is called middlebrow fiction is now dominating shops, along with that crossover of a personal narrative or life story, in fiction and non-fiction form. These have certainly taken over, or merged into, what was the literary fiction market.” Perhaps as a result we see a rising number of memoirs by authors of literary fiction; just some of the notable titles include Geraldine Brooks’ *Foreign Correspondence* (1999); Peter Carey’s *Wrong About Japan* (2005); Kate Jennings’ *Stanley and Sophie* (2008), and Brenda Walker’s *Reading by Moonlight* (2010). And even books that are published as fiction, such as Gregory David Roberts’ *Shantaram* (2003), are marketed and sold on the basis of their approximation of memoir. Considering the publication dates of *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place* relative to those Davis suggests represent a “decline of the literary paradigm,” both books likely helped shape the Australian reading public’s interest in memoir. They also say something about the crucial role small, independent publishers play in promoting diverse regional stories. What they don’t care much about is the line between memoir and the literary that critics and bookshop chains seem keen to shore up and patrol in their own interests, both cultural and economic.

To date, Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* has sold more than one million copies, and Morgan’s *My Place* more than 600,000 copies. The initial print run of *A Fortunate Life* was only 2,000 copies, but a steady demand for reprints stretched FACP’s finances, forcing the publishing house to lease the rights to the paperback version to Penguin. Sales of Facey’s book were boosted, no doubt, by the television mini-series that subsequently screened on the national commercial television broadcaster Channel 9, the rights for which netted FACP \$54,073. The book has also appeared as an audio book as well as in illustrated, condensed and large-print editions. Some sources report that the only Australian-originated book to have sold more copies is the *BP Touring Guide*. It is certainly a case of regionalism going national. In contrast to *A Fortunate Life*, the initial print run for Morgan’s *My Place* was

20,000 copies, with the title selling 35,000 copies before Christmas in the year of its publication, reprinted three times in pocket paperback form. In February of the following year, a mass-market paperback edition was issued; this edition has been reprinted more than 36 times. A special edition of *My Place* was released in 1999 to celebrate the sale of 500,000 copies, with FACP hanging on to the rights to the book throughout and negotiating a favourable distribution arrangement with Penguin. Both *My Place* and *A Fortunate Life* are set texts in many Australian high schools and universities, ensuring their continued sales success and recognised standing as significant stories that speak to, and extend beyond, the regions they narrate. By contrast, sightings today on Western Australian streets of “Home of the America’s Cup” vehicle registration plates are extremely rare.

Further reading

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