

interest in the country of her birth, a curiosity which only increases with age.

Eventually, Dong-Mei travels to China for a language course and during her time there decides that it is time she discovers her past. However, for Jane, Dong-Mei's Canadian mother, this decision brings about a series of emotions in which she regrets her "open-mindedness" and insistence that her daughter stay connected with her "Chinese roots". Her pain and fears over her losing her daughter are powerfully summed up when her character states, "I don't want to share her with a stranger. She's ours." This brief but emotional chapter clearly illustrates Ye's ability to dissect many of the intricate nuances of adoption, and the fears that many adopted parents feel when faced with the possibility that their child wants to make contact with their birth parents. Nevertheless, Dong-Mei is supported by her family and is able to make contact with her birth parents. While the reunion with her birth father is somewhat apathetic, the meeting with her birth mother is the most poignant moment of the work, because Dong-Mei is finally told the circumstances of her abandonment. She is also assured that her birth mother truly loved her and that she was wanted. The meeting also offers Dong-Mei's birth mother relief from the guilt, grief and pain she had suffered over her forced decision to abandon Dong-Mei. Ye's ability to immerse the reader in the emotional roller coaster of adoption is perhaps evidence of the pain she too suffered when she was forced to leave her own daughter behind, when she left China to live permanently in Canada.

While written as fiction, *Throwaway Daughters* is clearly representative of the real life experiences of many Chinese women. It not only details the gender inequalities and abuse that many Chinese women face, but also the impact that government policies, such as the 'One Child Policy', have had on the status of women in China. While *Throwaway Daughter* itself is not a memoir, it could be said that the publishing success and worldwide acclaim of Jung Chang's memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, paved the way for the recent proliferation of memoirs by overseas Chinese women about their experiences in China, including Ye's own memoir *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind*, as well as

fictional stories about Chinese women such as *Throwaway Daughter*.

It has been estimated that 40,000 children are adopted each year worldwide. However, even at a time when baby bonuses abound and the treasurer called on Australians to "have one for mum, one for dad and one for the country", inter-country adoption in Australia is being circumvented by an obvious lack of political will and bureaucratic mismanagement. While the United States show figures of over 18,000 inter-country adoptions in the year 2000, Australia only had 278 inter-country adoptions in 2002. Clearly Australia's figures could be a great deal higher, and *Throwaway Daughter* makes us question why our government cannot match the policies of other rich industrial nations when there are countless children worldwide, abandoned or orphaned, who are in desperate need of a new beginning.

BOOZE AND GUNSHOTS IN A HOT DRY SUMMER: AN AFRICAN CHILDHOOD

RICHARD GEHRMANN

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight.

Alexandra Fuller

(Random House, 2003)

"Mum says, 'Don't come creeping into our room at night.'

They sleep with loaded guns beside them on the bedside rugs. She says, 'Don't startle us when we're sleeping.'

'Why not?'

'We might shoot you.'

'Oh.'

'By mistake.'

'Okay.' As it is, there seems a good enough chance of getting shot on purpose."

In Toowoomba, the presence of African immigrants seems ever more apparent, and has changed this city in the past two decades. While the physical presence of Sudanese refugees is instantly observable, the (mostly white) migrants from Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) and South Africa are less obvious, but more numerous. Merging quietly into the population, only the occasionally overheard accent distinguishes them from their host community. Alexandra Fuller's book presents her upbringing in a complex postcolonial rural-regional African society that begs an understanding we rarely give it, because of the legacy of institutionalised racially based injustice. Yet in terms of similarities to mainstream 1970s and 1980s Australian culture and prevailing racial attitudes, her world is disturbingly familiar.

Born to white African parents, Fuller grew up in a simple world of sun-drenched freedom that many Australian parents approaching middle age remember with nostalgia. Freedom from the addiction of video or computer game, allowed to get hurt while playing, riding in the back of a Ute without seat restraints, hot vinyl car seats in summer are things we took for granted. Her rural life was however conditioned by constraints – the war that dominated early childhood, her alcoholic depressed mother, being middle class in values but not income, and the risks of post-war government corruption and mismanagement.

"Finally Dad turns to the man with the gun and says, 'For God's sake, either let us go, or shoot us.' The man with the gun is clearly drunk, but he is startled into a brief state of alertness.

In the backseat Vanessa and I sink into ourselves. I want to say, 'He was just kidding. Only a joke. Don't shoot, really.'

But the soldier starts laughing."

Fuller's enjoyable account is dominated by her delightfully eccentric family. The tragic deaths of three siblings, the drunken excesses of her mother, the careless love and cruelty of parents absorbed in their own struggles make most readers aware that by comparison our childhoods were rather pleasant.

Several books have been written by her generation, and this stands up well in comparison

to others by post-independence white authors. Male contemporaries such as Peter Goodwin (*Mukiwa*), Bruce Moore-King (*White Man; Black War*), and Chris Cocks (*Fireforce and Survival Course*) focus on the Rhodesian bush war (1972-80) in which perhaps 40,000 died. This preoccupation is entirely natural, given their author's conscripted participation in a struggle where the young were to undertake the fighting for their elders, only to realise in defeat how pointless and un-winnable the fight against black majority rule was. As a younger woman, Fuller's post-war concerns were not of personal rehabilitation from war. Her father being called up, armed convoys for routine trips to town and school, mandatory first aid and weapons lessons at home, and the sound of mines exploding in the distance is the arrestingly chronicled, inevitable background to her early life, not the primary focus.

I liked Fuller's novel, and in particular I enjoyed reading a book that in some ways connected with my own childhood in Queensland. Being of a similar age to Fuller made this book more accessible in terms of music, social customs, clothing styles, many of the emotions she felt, and the feeling of being of an unfashionable generation left behind by the alternative euphoria of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her family beach holidays at Cape Maclear in Malawi are an inland version of the traditional Aussie summer beach holiday, with her evocative description of lazy days of teenage love and embarrassment, music, beer, sunburn and cigarette smoke. Yet disturbing differences remain (such as the hilarious presence of the family's personal government spy), and even for white battlers, racially divided Africa was incredibly unlike life in Australia.

Race becomes an unavoidable issue after majority rule in 1980 when her boarding school is desegregated, and affluent black Africans become her schoolmates. Shared bathwater at a time of drought, and the realisation that skin colour is just that, bring home the changes that have occurred. With peripatetic parents, it is no surprise that the family moves first to Malawi and then Zambia, where they continue to manage farms in poverty-stricken, authoritarian "black" states just as they did in Ian Smith's

“white” Rhodesia. Of particular interest is her sudden shocked teenage awareness of the existence of African poverty, and her mother’s resigned acceptance that her daughter has reached a stage that she herself once reached, and passed beyond.

In Denoon’s *Settler Capitalism*, we were reminded of the links shared by immigrants of the former British empire. Too often we can be sanctimonious and see the history of Australian settlers as separate from the history of those of similar background elsewhere. Fuller’s book makes me realise that I, like most Anglo-Celtic Australians, am very lucky. When my forebears arrived here, they unwittingly became Australians. Had they committed the error of Fuller’s forebears and stopped off in Southern Africa, my family would, like hers, have become white Africans. They and their descendents would have been conditioned by different values and pressures, and might have been the bigoted upholders of unfashionable white privilege in Southern Africa rather than being liberal proponents of a fashionably multicultural Australia. This delightful book is more than an account of Fuller’s life – it is an account of what some of our lives might have been, and can also be read to provide insights into those living among us whose early life was in some ways so similar to ours, and in other ways so different. Without the challenge of an engagingly intoxicated Mother, that is.

A DIFFERENT BUSH

GEOFF PARKES

Lavender Blood. Barbara De Franceschi
(Seaview Press, 2004)

De Franceschi’s first collection of poems is drawn from her work over the last three years and spans a multitude of personal and public issues reflecting her concerns and positions in

the various roles she plays – as wife, as grand matriarch, as Australian citizen, and as sensory being. The themes also reflect her lifetime location, Broken Hill, and the physical environment, the weather and their changing effects are writ large throughout.

As an emerging poet, De Franceschi’s work shows a fine understanding of style and form, poems (thankfully) rarely rhyming yet she uses the lyrical value of her phrases to carry the meter. In “Dragon Or. . .” the narrator writes of an old lady, sucking mints and glaring at passers-by, “frustration falls about her ankles/ as though elastic in pink bloomers/ has given way”. It is these imagistic lines that elevate, so a poem about faded youth becomes something more than a dusty lens when we recall “heroes of late night talks in cafes,/ in a world shaped/ by the makers of artificial gazebos” (34).

Yet there are moments where the desire to explore the flexibility of poetic language damages the implicit attempt to communicate. For instance, the word “swale” is used several times: without affixing its context to its neighbouring expressions defied me and my three dictionaries. If I perceive correctly, many of these works are meant to be read aloud, and though some sound far better than they look – “Daggy shorts agitate sheep dung water” (16), for example – others, when spoken, obnubilate, and it’s a braver soul than I who can articulate, “On a world of boundless visions/ the sea can be stored in a thimble/ happiness struggles to attain the precious heights of sadness” (15).

Five lines later, though, De Franceschi gives us, “only a fool pretends to enjoy life/ suckling dry nipples with a naked tongue”, proving that what Lavender Blood details is growth, experience and risk taking. In an age where the banalities of bush poetry are perpetuated upon us at every hysterical and historical festival, Lavender Blood gives us a different bush, a way of living and writing through the lives and deaths that form part of this grand shamble we call life. If De Franceschi reaches more, risks more, challenges herself and her themes more for the explicit detail she excels at in some of these works, then she can expect to attain a healthy writing life, albeit one not easy nor rich in rewards.