

MY QUEENSLAND – THIS IS NOT FOR YOU

by Nike Bourke

Recently a woman of my acquaintance, a woman who writes but is not, she insists, 'a writer', helped me to see something I could not recognise, though I have encountered it again and again since I came to Queensland. When I first fled north, I thought – perhaps naïvely – that in Queensland nothing was hidden. People's bodies were always partly on display; their shady pasts – both personal and political – were worn with a certain kind of pumpkin-flavoured pride. Rakish, casual, be-thonged and benighted: here, everything was on display, everything could be bought and sold. It was a land of strip clubs and real estate, of glitz and glamour and shonk. It was the beginning of the '90s: the age of grunge, when Queensland's writers – led by literary lights such as Andrew McGahan and Matthew Condon – rolled the state's great, white underbelly into the light and let it burn.

Perhaps I was stunned by the glare of that whalish belly. Prudishly southern, I thought there was nothing else to reveal, or at least nothing significant. But as any magician, writer or politician knows, the dramatic revelation of one secret is a flourish that can conceal a thousand others.

For ten years now, I have been swept up in the juggernaut of writing courses – writing as a collaborative, educational activity – that has come at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the century in which, it seems, everyone has a story to publish. I have taught at universities and writers' centres, in schools and bookshops. I have turned up in all manner of places to listen to other writers worry at their craft, and to show them – to give them – what little I know.

Mostly, people come to these courses seeking recognition and publication, rather than ways to improve their craft. Telling them that writing is hard work – that writing takes time and sustained, back-breaking effort – is rarely welcome. Telling them that writing for fame, publication or money is like prospecting for fools' gold is even less so. 'Do it for the pleasure of the process,' I tell them. 'Writing for any other reason will break your heart.'

Writers are, largely, heartbroken fools. But there are others. I know a woman who dreams of writing. Every conversation she overhears, every image she sees, every gesture she notices, unspools in sentences inside her head. A kind of endless telegraph tape. These sentences are beautiful: each one as smug and perfect as an egg. I know this because I have had the privilege of reading those few she pins on to the page. And you, I know, have not. Most days, those pitch-perfect sentences never meet the page.

I ask her, 'Have you been writing?' This is what I always ask.

'Oh, well ...' she says. I hear the distance down the telephone line. 'You know how it is ...' On Saturday, she had planned to write because her husband was going to be out for the day, playing cricket with his friends. The game was cancelled at the last minute: a gift you should, but cannot, truly want.

All day, while they talked and ate and walked and enjoyed each other's company, she kept her hands in her pockets. Her fingers fidgeted with absent words.

She did not write.

It will be another two weeks until she can steal more time to write. She is a kind of petty shoplifter: incapable of the grand theft of a whole day, a week, a year to write; instead, she steals moments during work, or at night, when she is supposed to be shopping, driving, cleaning. Not enough so that anyone will ever notice. Certainly not her husband, who does not know that she

writes. Who does not know about her writers' group, or her meetings with her mentor, or her degree in creative writing, or even that she has won a handful of literary prizes for her short stories.

FOR TEN YEARS, AT LEAST, I HAVE BEEN HAVING THIS CONVERSATION. Mostly with women, sometimes with men. Never with children, whose time is still their own. I used to think it was a sad story: the tragedy of a person whose desire to write was sublimated to the needs of their partners, children, employers. I have come to see that there is instead a delicate, subversive edge to these acts of literary stealth. Their writing, as both act and object, is truly theirs in a world where so little privacy and pointless pleasure are allowed. In a culture where everything is supposed to be a product, where everything must have utility, they are engrossed in the deeply private pleasure of writing for its own sake. Charmian Clift once said that, in order to be a 'writer', you had to be prepared to tell all your secrets and everyone else's as well. An idea as seductive as it is dangerous. If she was right, then they are not – and will never be – 'writers'. In a world where the right to privacy is being eroded – is held suspect, even – they are engaged in the maintenance of secrets. In a state industriously concerned with unearthing and creating its own mythos, with the turning over of secrets as if to prove that it, too, is as historically complex, flawed and Byzantine as those 'other' states, they are keeping mum. Smiling politely with their hands in their pockets.

One woman I know has waited thirty years to write down the story she has been hearing inside her head. She is not a natural storyteller, and the words do not come easily. She writes them down, one by one, as a child puts its feet on the ground when it is learning to walk, with precision and cautious self-consciousness.

Another woman I know worked for ten years on a single story. It was five pages long, handwritten in pencil: 3B, I think, so light it was barely legible. She carried it in her handbag the whole time, folded into a square no bigger than a matchbox. If only you could have read that story.

A man I know recently moved out of his family home into a small apartment. He sat down at the computer and opened up the file in which all his stolen moments – his stolen sentences – had for so long been hidden. Each afternoon of his working life, before he left the office, he had deleted this file. And each morning he rescued the deletions from the recycling bin, restoring them to a folder so neatly buried in the sys.config meta-babylon of his computer that nobody – surely, surely – would discover it. Nobody did.

He opened this file and printed it out and set the pages on his table. For a month, he barely moved. Did not answer the phone. Did not write. Did not speak. Two pages of script he had accreted in all those years, as though by magic: five hundred and more words. Each word was – and is – as precious and private and jealously guarded as the dragon's hoard.

These not-writers are thieves, and their contraband is well hidden. They cannot afford to be revealed. Their crime – the theft of so many minutes, hours, days – is the crime of those whose time is not their own. They are not Queensland 'writers': they are not striving to speak of, for or to this sprawling, adolescent state. They have nothing to say to you. Unlike 'writers', they have no desire to reveal anything, least of all themselves. While 'writers' fret and strut their hour upon the page, as proud and privately ashamed of their skills and their profession as meter maids, these others simply write. One sentence. And then another. And another. They will not waste your time by showing you what they have written. They have already stolen time enough from you.

In the half-dark hours of the very early morning, if you drive past their houses, you can hear the papery rustle of their secret pages: a sound like the skirts of ghosts, brushing against the walls as they pass.