USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes of private study and research only. Passages from the thesis may not be copied or closely paraphrased without the written consent of the author.
Explorations and Discoveries
Charting the Imaginative World of Elizabeth Jolley

by

Patricia Joan Stadtmiller

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts
at the Australian National University.
I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis contains no material which is not the product of my own study and research except when acknowledgement is made in the text, notes or list of works consulted.

Patricia J. Stadtmiller
Dedicated to my parents Joan and Ian Stadtmmiller.
Acknowledgements

For the two years during which this thesis was being researched and written it was my privilege to have been supervised by Dr Axel Clark. I wish to express my gratitude for his guidance, for the time he spent reading and then discussing with me many drafts and for his readiness to assist me in fostering and developing my own ideas within the context of the thesis I wanted to write.

To my parents Joan and Ian Stadtmiller and to my friend Anne-Marie Liddle a heartfelt thank you for their constant love, patience and support.
Explorations and Discoveries
Charting the Imaginative World of Elizabeth Jolley

Contents

Declaration I
Dedication II
Acknowledgements III

Preface 1

Chapter One: The Exploration of the Alienated Psyche in *Palomino* 11

Chapter Two: The Relationship Between the Microcosm and the Macrocosm in *Palomino* 36

Chapter Three: Negotiating the Bridge and the Abysm with Reference to *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *Milk and Honey* 53

Chapter Four: Time Schemes Governing the Exploration in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* 70

Chapter Five: Spirals of Understanding in *Cabin Fever* 89
Chapter Six:
Space for Imagining with Reference to
Miss Peabody's Inheritance 107

Chapter Seven:
Exploring the Imaginative and Symbolic
Possibilities of the Non-Human World in
Milk and Honey 125

Conclusion 142

Afterword

Works Consulted
PREFACE

The primary objectives of this thesis are to explore the imaginative world of Elizabeth Jolley and to place her within the context of other Australian writers in order to determine the limitations and achievements of her work. The body of this thesis consists of seven chapters. Within them all page numbers to Jolley’s work appear parenthetically together with an abbreviated title of the story either being quoted from or discussed. The Modern Language Association of America’s method of citation has been used in the endnotes as well as in the list of works consulted.

Jolley’s literary output for an author who published her first book in 1976 is considerable. In the fourteen years from 1976 to 1990 she has published three book-length collections of short stories and ten novels. This thesis makes no claim to providing an exhaustive appraisal of all her fictional work. Rather within the thesis reference is made to a range of writing from the Jolley corpus and five novels are focussed upon in considerable detail. In her writing it is Elizabeth Jolley’s habit of mind as an author to return to characters emerging in preceding published works, to revisit landscapes and places and to rework phrases, images and motifs introduced in earlier writing. This is all part of what Helen Garner refers to as Jolley’s “inspired thrift.” Such overlapping or exploratory recycling means that it is possible to feel out the physical, emotional, intellectual and symbolic textures of her imaginative world through the close study of a selection of novels from within her oeuvre.

As a group the five novels selected for detailed analysis feature many of Elizabeth Jolley’s distinctive writing methods, recurring characters and main thematic concerns. When discussing her fiction in an interview for Scripsi Jolley explains

Because I work on several things at once, I often don’t know myself what was written first or later, but of course certain things I know. Everything in Five Acre Virgin was written before 1976 and
everything in *Travelling Entertainer* was written before 1979, but at the same time I was working on *Scobie, Milk and Honey, Palomino* you know.\(^2\)

The three novels Jolley mentions here, as distinct from the two collections of short stories, together with *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* and her most recently released novel *Cabin Fever* are the central texts for this thesis.

Chapters One and Two consider Jolley's exploration of the alienated psyche and of the self in society. Throughout her *oeuvre* Jolley's writing presents detailed studies of displaced, excluded, isolated or entrapped characters. She focuses in particular on their relationships with other people, their fears, frustrations, passions and profound vulnerability. Drawing extensively on the novel *Palomino* in these opening chapters I introduce and begin to develop the argument that Jolley's natural direction as an author is toward exploring the plight of those who do not "fit" with society.

Chapter Three extends this argument further by analysing Jolley's representation of such characters attempting to find ways of bridging the gap between the world they experience as misfits and "other" worlds in which they can experience a sense of belonging, where they are able to fit personally, sexually, spiritually, emotionally. In so doing the question of a certain intellectual unevenness evident in Jolley's writing arises and is addressed.

Generally Elizabeth Jolley's work is highly-crafted and convincing but within her *oeuvre* there are certainly examples of writing which is both simplistic and contrived. In his article "The Importance of Being Old Fashioned" Gerald Windsor comments upon the motifs in Jolley's short stories and notes the tendency towards "over-easy resolutions", the "too simple a dove-out-of-the-roof solution."\(^3\) In Chapter Three the novels *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *Milk and Honey* are analysed to show by juxtaposition the intellectual unevenness which is present in Jolley's writing. In this chapter I make some quite critical comments about the final pages of the novel *Milk and Honey* which deal with the central character's apparently effortless movement from a world he experiences
as both complex and extremely problematical to one of harmony and understanding. Later in the thesis, in Chapter Seven, I write in a far more appreciative way about the novel as a whole and in particular its imaginative and symbolic use of the non-human world.

Chapter Four considers the interrelated questions of how Jolley uses time in her writing and the extent to which her quite imaginative representation of time has the potential to enhance her reader’s appreciation of the lives of her characters. In exploring the lives of her characters Jolley is characteristically drawn to employ a narrative style which is best described as being both linear and circular. This dual apprehension of time is an aspect of Jolley’s creative expression which is a distinctive feature of such novels as Foxybaby, Milk and Honey, Miss Peabody’s Inheritance, My Father’s Moon, Cabin Fever and Mr Scobie’s Riddle. Chapter Four examines Jolley’s somewhat unconventional representation of time and in particular its expression in Mr Scobie’s Riddle where it occupies a position of centrality with the temporal world evoked and juxtaposed with the subjective other worlds existing removed from the flux of time. In this chapter it is argued that her characters’ public and private experiences and in particular the external and internal means of survival upon which they rely are inclusively, convincingly and often poignantly brought to life using an unusual and quite complex dual referencing of time.

Chapters Five and Six focus on how Jolley structures her writing. In Chapter Five the question of the value of Jolley’s use of spirals of understanding, a concept which informs much of her writing, is explored. In the novel Cabin Fever many of the structural aspects and concerns of Jolley’s fiction converge as one encounters a protagonist embarking upon an exploration of self which is both introspective and retrospective. The recently published, book-length collection of critical essays relating to Elizabeth Jolley’s writing opens with a two sentence reference to the novel Cabin Fever in the preface. While it is certainly deserving of critical attention this novel does not feature as the subject of analysis anywhere else in the publication Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays. In Cabin
Fever the protagonist Vera quite deliberately sets about conducting an exploration of self at a time in her life when she has achieved a considerable measure of experience and a degree of self knowledge borne of previous, if not as extended, moments of self-exploration and discovery. It becomes apparent as the narrative unfolds and finally spirals back to its beginning, as do novels such as The Well and Foxybaby, that this excursion of Vera's into the depths of her soul never really comes to an end. It is argued in Chapter Five that what it does do however is continue to yield for her insights and understandings which are of significant value within not only a personal but also increasingly a social context.

Chapter Six focuses on yet another aspect of the ways in which Jolley constructs her stories. In her writing Jolley relies heavily upon the imaginative contributions of her readers to fill the spaces she leaves and it is really necessary for the reader to assume a very active role in order to be able to interpret her work. Recently several critics have commented upon this aspect of her fiction, that is the imaginative, creative role each reader is called upon to accept whilst becoming familiar with Elizabeth Jolley's oeuvre.

In an essay entitled "Miracle Play: The Imagination in Elizabeth Jolley's Novels" Keryl and Paul Kavanagh discuss how in Jolley's fiction the reader's imagination is "brought into play by leaving gaps and ellipses for our imaginations to actively fill and by the creation of characters who are themselves readers." The Kavanaghs consider Jolley's use of incomplete plots, episodes, speeches and sentences in her fiction and argue that such a technique allows for implicit reading and speculation not only by the characters peopling a particular story but by her readers too. They conclude that the "imaginative weight of the novels is greater because of the density of their possibilities" and suggest that it is precisely this quality in Jolley's writing which give them as readers the "freedom of the poet ourselves to express our imaginations." Brenda Walker also draws attention to the possibility or perhaps even the inevitability of the reader taking on a heightened imaginative role in the reading process when she observes that Jolley provides "suggestive information which
observes that Jolley provides “suggestive information which creates speculative gaps for the reader.” What becomes apparent as the reader begins to read novels such as Foxybaby and Miss Peabody’s Inheritance is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distance oneself from the text as the relationship fostered between reader and author is an extremely flexible and interactive one. In reading one of Jolley’s stories one is immediately caught up in what Andrew Riemer refers to as a “collaborative endeavour” in which “the writer neither explains nor directs.” Chapter Six considers what intellectual and creative demands are placed upon the reader of Jolley’s work through the things she leaves unwritten and the spaces she creates on the printed page.

Chapter Seven considers the questions of what is setting for Elizabeth Jolley and how the non-human world is used in her writing. In this chapter it is argued that for Jolley the process of creating and developing her characters on the printed page in all the minutiae of their public and private lives, their past and present experiences, their dreams and realities characteristically involves the evocation of a non-human world which is both imitative and interactive. Gabrielle Lord in analysing Jolley’s collection of short stories titled Woman in a Lampshade observes that in the writing “Characters and backgrounds weave together, reflect each other, even become each other.” Jolley has a poetic sense of the imaginative and symbolic possibilities of setting. In her work the non-human world is carefully interwoven with the experiences of the characters, often becoming the external correlative mirroring the human event. In this analysis of the close observation and imaginative recreation of the natural world apparent in Jolley’s writing and particularly in relation to its expression in Milk and Honey it is argued that Jolley is an author with a rich and poetic sense of the imaginative and symbolic possibilities of the non-human world.

In this thesis each chapter addresses questions relating to particular and characteristic aspects of Jolley’s imaginative world and often juxtaposes her work with that of other Australian writers in order to determine the limitations and achievements of her work. Andrew Riemer in his article
“Displaced Persons—Some Preoccupations in Elizabeth Jolley’s Fiction” states

Mrs Jolley’s writing fits no preconceived notions of the concerns of Australian writers, she cannot be identified with any of the familiar coteries (or mafias) of the contemporary literary scene.12

In a discussion of Jolley’s first two collections of short stories Gerald Windsor makes a similar claim when he observes that “Her voice is highly individual, highly untypical of any place or time and blankly refuses to be used as an example of contemporary Australia.”13 Such assertions used in relation to the work of Elizabeth Jolley are quite misleading and, given the concerns of this thesis, need to be both acknowledged and refuted.

In an interview with Suzanne Hayes in which Jolley is questioned about her affinities with other Australian writers Jolley’s reply indicates that she perceives herself as working from within a particular literary tradition and that she does have a sense of belonging to a “layer” of contemporary writers. She says

I think that we are imposing change on the fiction writing and on the writing in general. But then that is nothing new because layers of writers over the years do slowly impose change just as musicians do.14

In a response to a questionnaire to authors for Australian Literary Studies Jolley explains “I am not drawn towards formal experimentation as such...My approach is traditional; story, character, metaphor, symbol, rhythm.”15 By considering her work in relation to that of other writers it becomes apparent that Jolley does have much in common with them, that she is a fine novelist working from within a particular literary tradition with shared interests and concerns.

The nature of Elizabeth Jolley’s writing is essentially
exploratory. In an interview conducted for the documentary The Nights Belong to the Novelist she explains "The act of writing is really an exploration of human behaviour and the trying to understand it, I think, is part of why a person might write, why I write." In Jolley's novel Foxybaby the character Mrs Castle is drawn whilst in conversation with the writer-character Miss Porch to a similar perception of the writing process expressed in more general terms,

"I've never before," she said, "thought about what a writer actually does. The idea of the writer," she regarded Miss Porch with widened eyes, "actually exploring, I think that was the word you used, characters and their relationships is very frightening. Where does it all end?" (FB, p.169).

The idea of writing being not only an imaginative act of creation but also one of exploration is certainly not novel in literature and serves as a useful starting point for consideration when attempting to appreciate Jolley's affinities with other Australian writers.

At one stage in Memoirs of Many in One the central character Alex Gray, reflecting upon her "editor" and friend Patrick White, links herself with this famous Australian writer and comments on the writing process when she observes "Patrick White himself is in search of the unanswerable, the unattainable. He will know that we, the explorers, stop at nothing." In David Ireland's A Woman of the Future the protagonist Alethea Hunt in providing a chronicle of her childhood and adolescent experiences and contemplating her future muses "Perhaps I would be an explorer of the human condition." Both Alex Gray and Alethea Hunt are creative characters as is the artist Willy Pringle who in the concluding pages of Voss links the artist's sensibility with the idea of exploration. He observes "common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them." Elizabeth Jolley, Patrick White, David Ireland and their creations Alma Porch, Alex Gray, Willy Pringle and Alethea Hunt - as a group they are all creative identities, artists and explorers. However this is not to suggest that,
especially in relation to the writers as distinct from fictional characters, in their explorations the paths they follow and the discoveries they make are similarly identical.

As author-cum-explorer Jolley does not characteristically offer to her reader tidy solutions to the conundrums of human existence which find expression in her writing. What she does offer the reader is the opportunity to imaginatively embark upon a voyage of discovery too, to adopt the role of fellow explorer as she sets about the task of observing and recording both the commonality and the plurality of human experience. In discussing her work with Jennifer Ellison Jolley states "I would like people to perhaps go with me in the exploration of human beings, but one can only explore really and put one's exploration forward."20 This thesis attempts to do just that, to "go with" her into her imaginative world and also to place her within the context of other Australian writers in order to come to know and to appreciate the nature and the particular demands, the limitations and the achievements of her literary journey of exploration and discovery.
NOTES


13. Gerald Windsor, "The Importance of Being Old Fashioned."

14. Suzanne Hayes, sound recording. Interview conducted during the Adelaide Festival, 1984. A copy of the recording is held at the Chifley Library, Australian National University, Canberra.


16. The Nights Belong to the Novelist, television documentary.


Chapter 1. Jolley’s Exploration of the Alienated Psyche in *Palomino*

The novel *Palomino* is perhaps the most misrepresented, underestimated and indeed maligned of Elizabeth Jolley’s works of fiction. In an article postulating “an approach to Elizabeth Jolley’s fiction” Andrew Riemer maintains that Jolley explores the possibilities of love between women “rather gushingly in the novel *Palomino*”¹, finds “the mixture of ‘elevated’ prose and melodramatic material unfortunate”² and dismisses the novel as “the least successful of Mrs Jolley’s works.”³ Similarly Helen Daniel in 1988 writes that *Palomino* is “often ridiculous rather than absurd, with much bathos and wordy earnestness and it suffers from a terrible plot.”⁴ In 1983 in a *Meanjin* article on Jolley’s fiction Helen Garner devotes but one sentence to the novel *Palomino* asserting that it is a “failure” because it is devoid of Jolley’s “weird humour.”⁵ Eighteen months later in the Sydney Morning Herald she publicly withdrew the remark stating

Re-reading *Palomino* I take my hat off to Elizabeth Jolley once again ..... Jolley is one of our older women writers at whose feet I will willingly cast myself.⁶

While this novel has met with mixed critical reviews it is, at least in the mind of this reader, a *tour de force* within the Jolley corpus and certainly has much which is new to offer within the context of Australian literature. The novel *Palomino* charts the developing relationship between two women and their individual and often very different struggles to come to terms with their quintessential selves and with a society which so often fails to meet their needs. In its consideration of the self and of the self in society the novel *Palomino* is not simply characteristic of Jolley’s main thematic concerns but also contains many examples of the very best that her writing has to offer.

In *The New Penguin Literary History of Australia* Julian Croft considers the beginning of “modernism”, the subject matter of which he identifies as “a depiction of the inner
state of the alienated psyche.” He goes on to explain

With the novel we can say that the modernist text is one which again represents an alienated consciousness through narrative techniques in which consciousness is represented directly through first-person narrative or through an omniscient stream of consciousness.

He mentions such novels as Chester Cobb's *Mr Moffat* and *Days of Disillusion*, Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and Henry Handel Richardson's *Ultima Thule* as all having some modernist features. Croft's definition of the "modernist text" however can also be applied to the writing of Elizabeth Jolley as in his discussion he lists some of the quintessential elements of her fiction where stories are characteristically told in the first-person by protagonists experiencing some form of displacement, marginalisation or alienation.

This is not to suggest that Jolley's work is merely derivative of other writers before her, or her contemporaries for that matter, who have used similar narrative techniques to explore the inner life of the alienated individual. She does have certain thematic concerns and styles of writing in common with other authors but her work is also in many ways distinctive. When considering the novel *Palomino* Pam Gilbert argues that

Jolley's attempt to... break away from the conventional concepts of women turning to madness, or to suicide, or to men as the final solution to their lives, is a challenge to conventional reading practices, and a further indication of Jolley's determination to forge something new.

By critically analysing the novel *Palomino* and juxtaposing it with the writing of such authors as Patrick White, Henry Handel Richardson and Elizabeth Riley it becomes apparent that while their fictional works do share certain features and
concerns Jolley’s writing also has much to offer which is both fresh and valuable.

In Jolley’s fiction older women characters are generally associated with a younger female, with either one or both of the females experiencing some form of social alienation and marginalisation. This author’s interest typically concentrates on what Marion Halligan refers to as Jolley’s “favourite archetypal couple: rich mature maiden lady and youthful, disadvantaged protege.” Examples of such pairing in her writing can be found in the associations formed between such characters as Hester Harper and the sixteen year old Katherine in *The Well*, Miss Thorne and the schoolgirl Gwendaline Manners in *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* and the de-registered gynaecologist Laura and the child-like Andrea Jackson of *Palomino*.

These individuals populating Elizabeth Jolley’s fiction are complex creations embracing a wide range of social levels and attitudes. They do however share two essential, if one is at all sympathetic with the concerns of the writing, characteristics in that they all speak for themselves and are in some way removed from the social norm. Reviewing the novel *Lillian’s Story* Jolley writes that Kate Grenville’s characters “leap from the essence of their own words.” That she appreciates such a quality in Grenville’s writing is hardly surprising given that her own fiction positively crackles with the vivid imaginative lives of her protagonists. Time and again Jolley’s central characters are encountered at the forefront of her stories where they speak for themselves rather than being written about. In a talk she gave at the Festival of Perth in 1985 Jolley discussed the concept of internal space which she defined as “the space which we create from our own attitudes, imaginations and emotions.” The immediacy and distinctive openness of her characters’ speaking voices makes it possible for the reader to feel out the contours of this space.

In being made privy to each character’s innermost thoughts, feelings and conflicts one is able to follow Elizabeth Jolley on an exploration which extends beyond the persona and deep into the anima of individual characters. The process is
akin to that which Atticus Finch advocates to his daughter Scout in *To Kill A Mockingbird* when he explains to her “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Jolley constantly strives to faithfully represent the world from the perspectives of her characters, to imagine it and understand it from their point of view.

Upon reading Jolley’s work one encounters each character’s highly subjective assessment of society and of his or her place within, or more likely removed from, it. A perception which so many of her protagonists share is one of not really belonging with the rest of society, of not fitting in or conforming to some social norm. Early in the novel *Milk and Honey* Jacob perceives both himself and Waldemar as foreigners (*MH*,p.26) and describes his own accent as “the exaggerated Australian accent of the central European who is trying to fit in” (*MH*,p.26). Hester Harper in *The Well*, whilst attending a party given by the Bordens remembers that “It had always been her way to be aloof and withdrawn” (*TW*,p.72). In *Palomino* Laura takes it upon herself to express the view in relation to the guests she and Andrea are expecting that they “represent another world outside the one we have here and neither of us wants this other world” (*P*,p.117).

The novel *Palomino* consists entirely of first-person narratives, letters, diary entries and extracts with consciousness of a distinctly alienated variety being represented directly, often intimately and always with distinctive immediacy. It attempts to deal seriously (rather than comically as is the case with the presentation of the relationships between Edgely and Thorne in *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, Paisley and Peycroft in *Foxybaby* or Price and Hailey in *Mr Scobie’s Riddle*) with the love between two women. Pam Gilbert in her book *Coming Out From Under* recognises this as a recurring theme in Jolley’s fiction when she observes

for many readers, the frequent description and exploration of lesbian relationships in the stories
and novels come as somewhat of a surprise. No other Australian writer has produced so many fictions with so many variations on such a theme.14

Thomas Shapcott also acknowledges the recurrence of lesbian relationships in Jolley’s fiction but takes such an observation a critical step further when he explains:

Given her chosen predilection for social and cultural victims, it is not surprising that Elizabeth Jolley has discovered in the subject of sexual outsiders a particularly resonant area for study. The sexual deviate is vulnerable even in a ‘permissive’ society.15

It is to severely underestimate and limit the scope of Jolley’s fiction to assume that her interest lies simply in describing a variety of lesbian relationships. Rather in a much wider sense they are one of the elements of her work which provide her with opportunities to begin exploring the experiences, the thoughts, feelings and actions of those individuals who fail to conform to the expectations of society, who do not fit into the established social stereotypes.

Jolley’s writing focuses upon human experiences and relationships. Some of her characters have had both homosexual and heterosexual experiences. These include Andrea of Palomino, Vera of My Father’s Moon, and Cabin Fever, Gwendaline Manners of Miss Peabody’s Inheritance and Peg in the harrowing short story “Grasshoppers”. Others are involved in what appear to be, at least on the surface, quite conventional heterosexual relationships or marriages. Couples such as the Forts and the Glasses in Palomino, the Bordens of The Well and the Chathams who Weekly cleans for in The Newspaper of Claremont Street fit into this category. There are still other characters whose sexual proclivities appear to be of the single-sex variety, such as Miss Thorne of Miss Peabody’s Inheritance and Laura of Palomino. In comparing the novel Palomino with Elizabeth Riley’s work All That False Instruction several similarities are apparent in terms of the
representation of the lesbian relationships. However, the
differences which also emerge between the two works help to
clarify where exactly Jolley's interests as an author do lie.

In both Palomino and All That False Instruction the
central female characters, Laura, Andrea and Maureen, are
lonely individuals leading disparate lives. Each woman during
the span of her life moves in differing worlds, cultivates
certain personal facades as protection against the judgements
of society in general and is witnessed struggling to reconcile
the conflicting and problematical aspects of her life. Both
novels are sensitive to the distinctive "otherness" of the
protagonists and their quiddity.

In All That False Instruction the protagonist Maureen
Craig attempts to build a loving relationship with first Julia,
then Libby and finally Cleo. In their construction these
associations have certain features in common with the
relationship between Laura and Andrea, especially with regard
to the central character's preoccupation with the apparently
idyllic aspects of homosexual loving. Maureen refers to her
time spent with Libby as being an "idyll"16, a time which
leaves her at least for awhile with "idyllic memories."17
Laura too is inclined to concentrate upon the more idyllic
aspects of her time with Andrea, referring to their time
together as "the ideal of an Idyll"(P,p.219). Maureen's sexual
relationship with Cleo begins as they are listening to "the
first movement of Beethoven's Seventh, energy and
strength."18 It is with Cleo she experiences a "compelling
complete union"19 and is able to tell Cleo "With you I forget,
I'm whole."20 In Palomino Laura likens the early stages of her
relationship with Andrea to "the first cautious phrases of a
Beethoven Symphony, the Fourth perhaps, or the Ninth"(P,p.75)
For the older woman this experience of loving is "as if two
halves of a whole have come together. And when two people
love as we do it seems to be the two halves recognising each
other and becoming one "(P, pp.193-4). In the representation
of their thoughts and feelings it is possible to find certain
similarities between Laura and Maureen, particularly in the
ways they tend to regard their relationships with their female
what the authors of *All That False Instruction* and *Palomino* manage to achieve it can be argued that Elizabeth Riley in this instance belongs to the first category Miss Hailey mentions whilst Elizabeth Jolley belongs to the latter.

Jolley's novel *Palomino* operates at a subtle level probing issues of wide and perennial concern, exploring with intelligence and sensitivity a range of human relationships and experiences and raising questions about conventional social morality and the morality of the individual. In *Palomino* the central characters are certainly keenly aware that they do not fit with what is considered normal within the mainstream society sexually and struggle in their own ways against social restrictions, taboos and stigmas. Yet it is not so much this as the love between the two women, between two human beings, which becomes the central and quite moving focus of interest.

*Palomino* was ready for publishing in 1976 but withheld by the publisher. Riley's *All That False Instruction* was published in the preceding year. Upon its release several years later *Palomino* by no means met with universal critical acclaim. In an interview for *Scripsi* Jolley explains

> You see, one of the troubles with writing the things I was writing was that quite a lot of the material was unacceptable. *Palomino* was held by a publisher from about 1976 to 1980 before it came out and things like "Grasshoppers" and "Long Distance Lecture" and "Fellow Traveller", which has a hint of homosexuality, were all rejected very strongly. When I first sent them off, nobody would have a bar of those stories.22

The "problem" with Jolley's writing being unacceptable derives from a certain explicitness in her work together with her matter-of-fact treatment of her characters' unconventional sexuality. Her writing does not have the sexual explicitness to be found in David Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* or in Riley's *All That False Instruction* but it does have an emotional explicitness.
Elizabeth Riley’s writing is sexually explicit in a way that Jolley’s work never is. Riley is often drawn to providing a detailed description of the physical and sexual aspects of loving which leaves little or nothing to the reader’s imagination. The following passage is characteristic of this kind of explicitness. During an interview with her lover Maureen Craig experiences

Relief as she kisses my navel and bundles her long breast between my legs, feeds its nipple into the soft bit where the flesh yields and opens. She moves it gently, bulging it up over the mound, delicious rubbing...Out of nowhere blue flame shimmers and shudders in the flesh of cunt, arse, back.23

Jolley’s works by contrast are concerned with an acute and precise rendering of the distinctions of thought and feeling which characterise an individual’s experience in a relationship. A gamut of intellectual and emotional responses are imaginatively realised in her fiction and explored. In the novel Miss Peabody’s Inheritance Diana Hopewell gives Miss Peabody a “little lecture” in a letter she sends, stating that love scenes

are familiar, even repetitive, if you pick them out of context and read them all at once...it is the circumstances, the going towards the love making and then the time afterwards, the thoughts, d’you see, and the feelings which make the scenes memorable (MPI, pp.11-2).

In Jolley’s writing it is the thoughts and the feelings of each character which are focussed upon rather than the sexual act itself which is often only hinted at.

In Palomino the presentation of the developing relationship between Laura and Andrea is both convincing and refreshingly matter-of-fact. In the interview for Scripsi
Stephanie Trigg comments that in Jolley's fiction the characters who are involved in homosexual relationships are never portrayed as feeling guilt or anxiety about social acceptance.\textsuperscript{24} Jolley's response is instructive,

No, and of course in \textit{Palomino} I don't mention the word 'lesbian' at all, ever. I don't see why people should be labelled because after all we don't say 'Oh, we're living next door to such an interesting heterosexual couple.'\textsuperscript{25}

In relation to \textit{Palomino} what may well have been unacceptable in the minds of some readers was the notable absence of such social labelling. So many of Jolley's characters are social misfits, alienated, marginalised, dislocated individuals. In Jolley's fiction there is the suggestion by default that the application of social labels to these individuals is not only unhelpful but completely unnecessary in terms of coming to understand their predicaments and experiences, to know and appreciate them as human beings.

In \textit{Palomino} as Jolley sets about the task of charting the budding closeness between the two women the task of narration alternates between Andrea and Laura. One receives an energetic sense of these individuals' public and private selves as their living and loving is revealed through their changing thoughts, feelings and moments of responsiveness. Both Laura and Andrea are alienated from society. One of the epigraphs to the story "Grasshoppers" could well be applied to both these protagonists. It is taken from Rilke and reads "Now is my alienation full, and without name it floods me" (\textit{TE}, p.142). As their social estrangement threatens to or does overcome them each woman seeks to find her own solutions and it is in their questing that they finally enter into a relationship with one another.

Andrea is a young school teacher recently returned from Ceylon and recovering from some illness. She is anaemic and emaciated and displays an apparent nervousness in the way she walks and in the restless twisting of her fingers. In contrast
to Laura she has no money whatsoever and few possessions. In
the youthful feelings and sexual energy and appetite of the
young Andrea Jackson it is possible to recognise imperative
needs at odds with society. At a social level Andrea’s
situation is quite similar to Laura’s, at least in terms of the
conflicts in her life and her reliance on concealment. Andrea’s
life is complicated because she is involved in a long-term
incestuous relationship with her brother and she has
discovered that she is carrying his child. She is confused and
tells Laura “if only you knew how horribly mixed up I am. I
can’t sleep. What can I do! I can’t bear it! How ever can I tell
you. I’m so mixed up!”(P,p.91). She does not know where she
belongs and like Laura before her is seeking a place where she
can usefully and purposefully fit in a personal and sexual
sense. This takes her to Laura’s valley farmlet once the older
woman extends the invitation.

Professionally Laura is a disgraced gynaecologist who,
having administered a fatal injection to an elderly colleague
Esme Gollanberg, was struck off the register and imprisoned.
Upon her release from gaol she retired to her land in the valley
where the novel finds her living in virtual seclusion. As a
character Laura fits the list of comparative generalisations
Pam Gilbert provides when she writes

Unlike the women characters constructed by some
Australian women writers, noticeably Helen Garner
and Olga Masters, Jolley’s women are often free of
family responsibility. Unlike the female characters
typical of Barbara Hanrahan’s fictions, they are
economically secure and often socially privileged.
And unlike the women Jean Bedford constructs,
Jolley’s women are not trapped in cycles of
emotional dependence, nor do they seek illusory
romance. Jolley’s female characters are different and that
“differentness”, as is apparent in Laura’s case, is enough to
isolate them socially.

In her life Laura has had to endure a great deal of public
as well as private scarifying and in presenting an outer personality to the world she is careful to conceal certain aspects of her nature insofar as it is possible. Laura's persona is that of a well-dressed, articulate and analytical middle-aged woman who speaks softly and with an air of shy graciousness. She is well-educated, single, childless and financially independent having had "the good fortune ... to have a lot of valuable land left to (her), especially valuable, the land by the river and Uncle Todd's enormous house down there too, all very desirable, and it sold well"(P,p.115).

In coming to know Laura better it becomes increasingly apparent that behind the carefully cultivated persona is an anima often at odds with society as she perceives and experiences it. In this sense she can be compared with two literary namesakes - Laura Trevelyan in Voss and Laura Rambotham in The Getting of Wisdom. All three of these female protagonists "vary from the common mould"27, to use Henry Handel Richardson's phrase, in quite fundamental ways. All three are intelligent females, often isolated, lonely and alone, experiencing scant intellectual or emotional kinship with the majority of people they encounter in society.

The two central characters of Palomino are never imagined speaking in a public way where the voice is raised. Rather they are imagined in private situations where the voice is hushed so that the mind may be heard through it, what Jonquil Castle in Foxybaby is apt to refer to as "rivers of conscience"(FB,p.86), or if not exactly hushed at least speaking in such a situation of privacy that things are said which might never be uttered in public. Through the private situations in which they are heard speak these initially remote and unfamiliar characters talk in such a way as to compel the reader to be intensely familiar with them. The private voice draws one near, beyond an appreciation of simply the persona which has been carefully prepared for public consumption and on to an exploration of each character's quintessential self. Through the direct representation of the changing thoughts and feelings as experienced, perceived and expressed by Laura and Andrea, Jolley begins her exploration of each character's inner
self - imaginatively realising the complexities and contradictions inherent in the relationship, the passions, the fears, the joys and the sadnesses which mark the private lives of these two vulnerable and alienated characters.

The relationship itself is a passionate, erotic one and the reciprocity between the two women at times is unmistakable. It is an extremely intense relationship, by turns demanding, constraining, playful, sarcastic, loving, tragic. When discussing Jolley’s “Grasshoppers” (TE, pp.142-187) Thomas Shapcott observes

One of the things that gives (this story) its special force is the fearful and passionate intensity of the sexual relationship between the two young women: the need and urgency are underlined, not any implication of abnormality.28

Similarly within the relationship shared by Andrea and Laura sexual passion is given a kind of centrality but not so much the sex act itself as an intensity of thought and feeling which is revealed as the depths of the personal experience for each character are explored.

It becomes apparent through the lovers’ reflections, feelings and actions that in their private lives each one’s psyche makes a socially acceptable heterosexual conformity unbearable and that they have both suffered because of this. Pointing to this are the generally unsurprising remarks and reactions of characters such as Jake Jackson and his cousin Doug to Laura’s perceived otherness. At one stage in her diary Laura writes “I have never been able to forget Jake’s coarse laugh and his even coarser joke about me and the rough laughter of the others at my expense” (P, p.142). Later in the same diary she recounts an incident where in the early hours of the morning she meets Doug emerging from an outside toilet,

“I see you’re no fairy after all,” he laughed and
stumbled back to the house laughing as if he had said something very funny. I cannot stand this type of humiliation (P, p.150).

As well as having to cope with the unkind comments of some of the people around her Laura also struggles to come to terms with aspects of her own personality and is often very harsh on herself. When her housekeeper of many years dies Laura engages the services of “sweet Dora” who is “so good natured, red cheeked always like a child”(P,p.27). Toward this young woman Laura soon feels a tingling attraction which derives in part from a genuine affection for Dora but also from Laura’s considerable and unfulfilled emotional and sexual needs. After contemplating revealing her desire to Dora Laura berates herself stating “That night I prowled around restlessly, a monster really, thinking of her appalled at what I was. I went to bed about four in the morning and wept because of what I was”(P, p.29). Laura’s inner conflict resulting from what Andrea describes as Laura’s “deep longing to express what she feels she must not express” (P,p.155) is most apparent in the narrative. There are contradictory forces at work in her life and Laura’s awareness of the need to conceal her true sexual nature, to continually hide it from public scrutiny, is often painfully acute.

The self-speaking, self-chronicling presentation of the private inner lives of Laura and Andrea makes it impossible to pigeon-hole either of these characters, to stereotype them on the basis of their sexual proclivities. In the novel the lesbianism and incest serve as catalysts for the present situation and yet do not become particular foci of interest. One is drawn rather to see things in new ways, freed from convention, to cleanse the doors of one’s perceptions to use William Blake’s phrase29 and to appreciate the relationship through the eyes of the two people involved.

As the relationship develops and Jolley’s exploration of the inner and private lives of the two female characters deepens it becomes evident that certain fundamental experiential similarities exist between Andrea and Laura. For
both women the relationship is something urgently felt, amorous and compelling. At one stage in the novel Laura reflects

I gently finger the tiny nipple-like fruits of the quince and, thinking of Andrea, I experience pleasurable sensations all over my body. I would like to go back up to the house to where she is asleep. I want to go and wake her and tell her I love her. I want to love her, the desire in me is so strong I start to walk up the slope back to the house (P, p.126).

As Andrea craves to repeat the love making experience with Laura she recognises that “Her perfume haunts me, it makes me want her again. I want to lose ourselves again in that same urgency. This time I want it for me too. Oh Laura I do want it again” (P, p.80).

Such an intensity of feeling is something which both Laura and Andrea experience within the relationship. It manifests itself in their longing for one another and in their consuming enjoyment of each other. It finds expression in characteristically rapturous language. Both Laura and Andrea in commenting upon the relationship are given to expressing their thoughts and feelings in a most lyrical manner. In Laura’s absence Andrea pines “Oh Laura come back quickly. You are made for loving and kissing Laura ... when you are not here there is no life” (P, p.172). Just as fervently Laura refers to Andrea as “my dearest dearest child” (P, p.94) and maintains that “Everything about her interests and enchants me” (P, p.107).

The novel Palomino is constructed in such a way that the same scene is often filtered through the consciousness of both narrators at various times throughout the novel. This “overlapping” strategy is most effective in uncovering many of the tensions and contradictions within this relationship which on the surface on so many occasions appears to be so idyllic. The first shared physical intimacy between the two
women provides such an opportunity for juxtaposition. Each woman’s individual thoughts and feelings expressed in anticipation of the love making and in reflection after it, when compared, point to the many-faceted, complex nature of the relationship and the diversity of individual impulses conjoining their lives.

Prior to their first love making Laura feels that she wants to protect and cherish her young companion. However because in the past Laura has suffered publicly and privately as a consequence of her desires her feelings here are tempered with restraint and caution. In the past wanting and attempting to establish a close and intimate relationship with another human being has brought her pain and an accentuated sense of her own loneliness. She experiences “loneliness after the ridiculous and horrible affair which ended the friendship (she) had with Eva” (P,p.28). She is “forced to understand (her) loneliness more” (P,p.29) during her time with Dora. Understandably she is quite apprehensive about the prospect of once again attempting to step into the world of loving and cherish another human being in her own way.

Andrea is also apprehensive. She goes to Laura’s valley farmlet because it is expedient for both her brother Christopher and for herself that she be there. When Laura first extends the invitation during a dinner party given by Rodney Glass Andrea’s inner reaction is

I must go tonight or else give way to something desperate and violent and horrible in me and in Christopher. He must know. That’s why he is urging me to go away ... He is afraid too. If he weren’t afraid he wouldn’t have asked Laura to have me. That’s what he’s done really; pushed me on to her (P,p.63).

That it is convenient for Andrea to escape to the valley is obvious and this rather than any romantic or idealised notions of loving the older woman provides the motivation for her presence in Laura’s world.
Laura’s place offers Andrea a refuge from the demands, the pressures, the restrictions and the judgements of the outside world. Shortly after she arrives at Laura’s place Andrea reminds herself “I must be careful with myself, and I must be careful with Laura. This is the only place I have got at present and I need to be somewhere” (P,p.73). The perceived and alluring safety and security of the farmlet is something which Andrea finds enticing. Yet, she does not know really what to expect and is also uncertain what her recently-acquired companion will demand.

In Jolley’s exploration of these female characters it becomes apparent that the feelings which characterise each woman’s involvement in the budding relationship differ markedly. After the love making both women are drawn to memories of the past but they are memories which are quite different in substance and in terms of the emotions they call forth. Intimacy with Andrea leaves Laura feeling “excited and happy and a little sad at the same time” (P,p.85). Her thoughts turn to moments of “secret perfection” (P,p.85) and are closely linked with the natural world of music. She reflects

I have walked right across the valley. It is like the shared music, a perfection of harmony and rhythm. I keep feeling the perfection and I feel full of the music, the Beethoven, the harmony and the movement fit so closely to this private cherishing (P,p.84).

Conversely Andrea is left struggling to cope with “the dreadful muddled thoughts inside (her) head” (P, pp.79-80). She misses Laura when she wakes in the morning and finds that the older woman has left the bed, experiences longing and loneliness as a result of this and also guilt as her thoughts turn to the incestuous relationship she has shared with her brother and her “unfaithfulness” to him. In recognising and appreciating each character’s anticipation of and response to the act of loving it is possible to draw close to these two protagonists and to follow them into inner worlds in which
most intense and individual qualities of thought, feeling and perception are discovered.

What becomes apparent as the novel progresses is that the inner worlds of these vulnerable and marginalised female characters are not necessarily identical worlds even though they do share some common characteristics. The differences existing between the inner worlds of Laura and Andrea are both important and enlightening in terms of coming to know and appreciate these alienated characters as very individual human beings. Jolley's sensitive representation of their complexities of character and distinction of thought and feeling really calls into question the labels society affixes to so many people who do not fit the norm - labels which by comparison are unjustly pejorative, hopelessly narrow and inadequate.

As a writer Jolley does not characteristically intrude with any authorial signposting to guide the reader. In Palomino both protagonists offer their innermost thoughts and feelings to the reader. However it is not possible to rely completely on either of the characters for an objective assessment, to accept as definitive one character's observations regarding the way things are, for in every instance it becomes clear that such perceptions are coloured by the character's preoccupations, motivations and past experiences. It is left to the reader to adopt an active role in the sense of attending carefully to the flickers of thought, subtle nuances of feeling and ways of seeing the world in relation to each character, comparing one character's perceptions with those of the other. It is in this way that the quintessential elements of each protagonist's psyche, and of the relationship itself, become known.

For the two women living on the farm life is essentially a passionate and yet profoundly problematical affair, the passion being something they both experience, the problems often lurking beneath the surface with at least one of the protagonists choosing not to acknowledge their existence. For Laura life in the valley before Andrea's arrival is "something
idyllic and delightful" (P, p.24). She constructs for herself a secluded haven designed to shield her from what lies beyond its narrow boundaries and to gratify her needs and desires with expensive food to eat, classical music to listen to, well made clothes to wear and little calves to feed with oats at the close of day. It is characteristic of Laura that in craving perfection she is able to overlook the dilapidated condition of her house, the wretched circumstances of her tenants and the blatant neglect of the stock and property on her place. Similarly she later chooses not to acknowledge, insofar as it is possible, the more problematical aspects of her relationship with Andrea.

The existing components of Laura's solitary lifestyle fall short of meeting her considerable emotional and sexual needs. It is these generally repressed and concealed aspects of Laura's self which underpin her invitation for Andrea to repair with her to the valley farmlet. Laura seeks what Teresa in Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* perceives her lover James Quick as wanting - what Teresa terms "a woman's love", that being "the intensely passionate, ideal, romantic love of famous love affairs." Laura's several attempts to establish an intimate and loving relationship with another human being - first with Eva Jackson and then with Esme Gollanberg and in the present with Andrea Jackson - reveal that an intensity of feeling and a preoccupation with the ideal coupled with concerns of self-interest and self-absorption to the point of narcissism are pivotal in explaining Laura's involvement in each instance.

Andrea's reasons for and degree of involvement in the relationship differ markedly to Laura's. The young woman reflects shortly after her arrival on Laura's farm "If only I could love her as much as she seems to love me. Really love, I mean, not just a hope to get out of the terrible muddle I am in" (P, p.98). Such an observation signals Andrea's awareness of a fundamental tension inherent in the relationship and defines her own involvement within it. For Andrea Laura's invitation is opportune as she desperately needs to escape, at least for awhile, from much that she feels to be potent,
oppressive and objectionable in human society. In taking refuge in Laura’s valley she hopes to find for once in her life “something real” (P,p.61), to discover what is appropriate and of enduring worth for her equivocal self.

Andrea’s search for knowledge, for wholeness, for amour propre begins with her escaping to a different location rather than with any clear-sighted recognition of her quest as being a process of “becoming”, of coming to know and to be her true self, which will involve both pain and struggle. In a passage from All That False Instruction the central character Maureen tells another woman Jody of her decision to relocate. In Maureen’s case she intends to leave Australia. Jody’s response suggests that there are far more fundamental and personal considerations which the questing individual has to come to terms with in order to find peace, harmony and acceptance. She says to Maureen “Well right on. The only snare with that is that you won’t be leaving yourself.”31 In Andrea Jackson’s fluctuating thoughts and feeling as the relationship unfolds there is a similar awakening awareness of the demands of her particular journey and of the incompatibility of the objectives of her quest with her present life with Laura.

Laura’s emphasis on harmony and rhythm, on the perfection of the relationship is in sharp contrast to Andrea’s unspoken lament to the older woman. Andrea reflects “I want to tell her I want more than rain. I find the place and the quietness intolerable. I want people and I want, oh, I don’t know what I want. I want to go away”(P, p.230). On the secluded farmlet Andrea’s safe, cocooned existence is ultimately insufficient in meeting her developing needs She comes to feel “really trapped in this place” (P, p.228). The young woman’s growing frustration with her life on the farm and awareness that she will at some stage dispense with it and return to the wider, more various world are increasingly evident as the novel unfolds. Her decision finally to leave is a natural one given the nature of her quest. It is the first hard step she takes towards maturity, towards recognising and coming to terms with the immense challenges and demands of being alive and being herself within the circumscribed culture
which so often fails to meet her needs and expectations.

As the relationship begins, evolves and arrives at its conclusion the direct representation of Laura’s psyche reveals a very complex self. Being privy to Laura’s innermost thoughts, feelings and perceptions as she attempts to incorporate Andrea into her life and cherish her it is possible to appreciate the factors which have dominated Laura’s life in the past and in the present too. What are also apparent are the very real personal insights and understandings she gains as a result of her involvement with the younger woman as she moves towards “human love instead of self-love”, a distinction Andrew Hawkins makes in Stead’s *For Love Alone*.

The concept of the ideal is a very powerful motif in the novel and and it is one of the two governing factors in Laura’s life. In Laura’s relationships with other women she has characteristically sought perfection and used herself as a measure of that perfection. The relationship with Eva Jackson is likened to the music of Beethoven, a “duo of two minds in complete partnership, working together communicating so perfectly” (*P*, p.220). In seeking perfection before all else she chooses to ignore the true nature of this relationship and of the woman she so desperately wishes to cherish. She really admits this to herself in the novel when she states “I suppose I was looking for myself in her and never saw her” (*P*, p.220). This is to be a recurring feature of her life as time and again she creates an idealised image in her mind of a person to whom she is attracted. This image is constructed in the main from her perception of herself. This tendency in Laura’s character has quite dramatic consequences in her involvement with Esme Gollanberg.

Each relationship Laura has with a woman is not identical and yet Laura’s preoccupations and limitations in each instance are very similar. Over an extended period of time Laura engages in considerable correspondence with a colleague Dr Esme Gollanberg. At one stage she remembers

I spent hours writing to you, studying what you had
written to me and then writing and rewriting my answers. And then there were all my questions to your wisdom and your learning and your ideas (P, pp.173-4).

The two women communicate at an intellectual level but do not actually meet with each other face-to-face for quite some time. This leaves Laura free to indulge her penchant for idealising and romancing. She acknowledges later to herself in relation to Dr Gollanberg “I created for myself your perfection” (P, p.180).

Into this image Laura projects much of herself and at the airport she searches in vain for the Esme of her imaginings. It is clear when the two do meet that Esme falls far short of Laura’s ideal and the elderly doctor’s shortcomings are gauged through comparison with Laura herself. Laura notes “I am tall” (P, p.178) while Esme is “small, thickset and stout” (P, p.178). She observes

I have a flat quiet voice and yours shrilled up and down as you spoke to me in the imperfection of knowing several languages without troubling to learn one of them properly (P, p.178).

The strength of her imaginings is such that when Esme fails to measure up to Laura’s expectations and instead of someone “graceful, kind and clever” (P, p.178) Laura sees in her own estimation little more than a rutting old hag Laura murders the elderly woman. In this one single and horrendous act it becomes apparent how Laura’s obsession with what is in her view ideal increasingly dominates and affects her life and emphasises her inability to cope with reality.

Laura’s involvement with Andrea once again is founded upon the part-real, part-imagined, idyllic aspects of loving. She tells the younger woman “I want our love together to be perfect” (P, p.74) and spends much time deluding herself and trying to persuade Andrea that their life together is perfect.
For Laura it is as if their “two hearts are beating like one” (P, p.83). This is an image she returns to and develops later in the novel when she explains that it is as if two halves of a whole have come together. And when two people love as we do it seems to be the two halves recognising each other and becoming one (P, p.194).

In the past Laura’s way of imagining things has not always provided her with an accurate picture of the way things actually are and this interlude with Andrea is no exception. However it is clear through having access directly to Laura's thoughts and feelings in this instance that there are significant differences between Laura’s relationship with Andrea and her previous involvement with Esme and Eva.

One does not have to delve too deeply into the relationship between Laura and Andrea to find the older woman taken up with considerations of self which are once again more than faintly narcissistic. While holding Andrea asleep in her arms Laura muses over the suggestion that “people never love other people, they only love themselves through others” (P, p.93). However she modifies this almost immediately when she reflects “I believe I do love her. I suppose in loving someone it is possible to discover oneself” (P, p.94). Laura has loved herself through other people in the past and perhaps is still doing so in her relationship with Andrea but she also makes some important discoveries about herself too in the present relationship. Loving one’s self and discovering one’s self through loving another person are not the same thing but they are, or at least can be as evidenced by Laura’s experiences in this relationship, mutually compatible.

At the end of the relationship Laura is in a similar situation to the elderly Hester Harper who also senses the imminent end of her relationship as she has known it with a younger woman, the orphan Katherine in The Well. Hester
thinks of how Kathy will tell her that she wants to go away and leave her and she thinks of what she must say in reply and she wants to break down and weep before this conversation can take place (TW, p. 171).

Andrea’s proposed departure also causes Laura considerable distress and yet in this situation she is seen as at last able to accept the most fundamental condition of human existence, that is change. Where in the past she has resorted to murder she is now prepared to place the interests of another human being before her own concerns.

Laura has known love and consideration with this younger woman. In her relationship with Andrea Laura feels unable to take the initiative sexually and is grateful to Andrea for doing so, for introducing such foreplay as the little belt-unbuckling ceremony. This enables Laura to discover the world of loving to a degree hitherto unknown to her and to experience the open recognition and satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs and desires long suppressed. At the conclusion of the relationship Laura is now prepared to reciprocate that love and consideration even though it causes her pain. The older woman observes in relation to Andrea “She has enriched and nourished me. Her life shall be my first consideration” (P, p.222). She has discovered within herself a capacity for loving and caring which transcends her self-interests and is ready now to do what is necessary for Andrea’s well-being even though it causes Laura considerable anguish.

The other central determining factor in Laura’s life has been, and indeed still is if to a somewhat lessened degree, fear. This emotion has dominated and restricted her life, forcing her to conceal the true nature of her personality rather than risk exposure and possible public ridicule. In the past she has feared “Mrs Platt finding out something about (her) secret world” (P, p.14), “Uncle Todd or Rodney and worse, Mrs Glass, or any of them probing into (her) secret world” (P, p.140), “some kind of exposure, some
kind of cruel joke at (her) expense" (P, p.154). At the end of the novel fear is still present in her life. As Andrea prepares to re-enter society Laura is left behind in her insular little world, lonely once again, frightened and still hiding. She has not managed to reconcile all the conflicting impulses in her life, has not found a solution to the many things which trouble and torment her in the world and within herself.

Loving Andrea has helped Laura to overcome or at least to contain many of her fears and inhibitions. This whole process is reminiscent of the observation which is made in Patrick White’s novel Voss that “the mystery of life is not solved by success which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming.” Her degree of involvement with the younger woman, her acceptance that it must necessarily come to an end and the caring way in which this is effected signal that Laura is evolving as a person, is “becoming”. She is involved in a struggle to know and to be true to her self just as Andrea is and has experienced something of the pain and the moments of joy that such an ongoing quest promises.

Jolley’s representation and exploration of the alienated self in Palomino raises many questions about the self in relation to society, about personal morality and social conventions. Informing her exploration is a sensitivity and wisdom which recognises that the paths to ultimate understanding and knowledge are as diverse as the nature and quality of human experience itself. Because in the novel the individual ways of seeing and being, of questing are juxtaposed they are both distinct and yet also carefully interwoven into a whole which recasts the characters within a social context providing a larger and more inclusive image of the alienated self within society.
NOTES


In an essay titled simply "The Novel" Ken Gelder discusses preoccupations in recent Australian writing and observes that "The last two decades have produced a significant number of novels ... focusing on 'misfits'." He mentions among others such works as Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country*, Antigone Kefala's *The Island*, David Malouf's *Harland's Half Acre*, Patrick White's *The Vivisector* and *The Twyborn Affair*, Beverly Farmer's *Alone* and Jolley's *Mr Scobie's Riddle, Miss Peabody's Inheritance* and *Palomino*. Elizabeth Jolley's fiction is peopled with protagonists who for a variety of reasons do not fit easily with society and its conventions. Her writing characteristically explores the experiences of the aged, the female, the homosexual, the migrant or the artist as misfit.

Jolley's alienated characters often assume that for them the outside world is non-existent as they disappear into the microcosms which constitute the setting in so many of her novels. It is in this way that *Mr Scobie* (*MSR*, p.40), Jacob (*MH*, p.96) and Hester Harper (*TW*, p.40) all refer to the "outside world" as a distant and separate entity. Laura and Andrea in *Palomino* also perceive their world as being removed from the existing one of human society. As Andrea travels with the older woman to the valley farmlet on that first night she feels that she is being ushered "into another world" (*P*, pp.72-73). Shortly afterwards while at the Murphy's house Laura reflect's "I want to go home. I think of Andrea and of our evening and it seems to belong to another world" (*P*, p.79). However it is precisely during the direct representation of these two female characters' individual points of view in *Palomino* that paradoxically a quite different and contradictory picture begins to emerge.

Jolley has stated "I see my characters in relation to each other and in relation to society." In *Palomino* as the narrative unfolds elements of society at large are continually being
unearthed from the little world which both Laura and Andrea perceive as being distinct from the outside world. The notion of one world existing in isolation from the other is refuted by the gradual discovery of an existing relationship which is best described as being that of a microcosm to the macrocosm.

Laura and Andrea share a bifurcated view of society in which people divide neatly into a cadre of human beings who fit the existing social structure and a minority of those who do not fit. In their minds the lines are clearly drawn with themselves belonging to the latter category. Society in Laura's opinion has little to offer the equivocal or unconventional individual as it is governed by "the standards of ... conventional married couples" (P, p.91). For Laura society consists largely of a homogeneous group of just such couples sharing similar backgrounds, interests, skills and concerns. She tells Andrea about

the lives people have together year after year with nothing between them except money arrangements, the education of their children, lots of clean clothes and showers and big meals and conventional good behaviour with other married couples (P, p.91).

She is very quick to pejoratively generalise and categorise in relation to people she has encountered in society. In this way she imagines

all [her] smiling pregnant patients, self-satisfied, asleep in their well-kept homes, secure, protected by layers of brick and tile and well-manured rose beds, marriage and reticulation, double fronts, double garages, double beds and double faces (P, p.137).

Andrea is also given to regarding much of humanity in a simplistic and dismissive manner and with more than a little vitriol on occasion. During the dinner party given by the Glasses she observes those present, with the exceptions of herself and Laura, as being
like hundreds of others all the same as each other. They have hundreds of friends and acquaintances but hardly mean anything to one another. Their friends are all clean too like these people are clean. Very clean. Clean clothes, clean hair, clean houses, clean swimming pools, clean cars and clean minds with nothing in them (P, p.60).

Laura and Andrea indulge each other's penchant for passing judgement on the rest of humanity whilst living together without recognising the similarities which exist in relation to themselves and the people they dismiss so disparagingly. They have both fled from a milieu in which the inhabitants were felt to be judgmental and inflexible to create their own exclusive little haven in which similar qualities of thought and perception are most apparent.

In living as they both do Laura and Andrea assume that their separate existence is very different and superior to that of people such as the Forts and Glasses who clearly belong in the minds of these two women to the outside world. A consideration of the life Andrea and Laura share together in the valley however reveals the extent to which characteristics of the social macrocosm are to be found in the microcosm. The surname "Glass" provides a clue to the relationship between the two worlds as in the lives of the very couples Andrea and Laura disparage it is possible to find many reflections of their own relationship and lifestyle.

Laura's response to her perception that the existing social order has little to offer one such as her is to turn her back on society and create her own private and insular little haven. In it she lives the life of a recluse, reminding the reader at one stage in the novel

I have been quite alone for some years. I really have no-one, and except for a few arranged visits between the Forts and Rodney Glass and his family I see no-one (P, p.37).
In choosing to live as she does Laura constructs her own "fort". It is founded upon her own rejection of society. Its parameters are firmly established in Laura's mind and the "enemy", as it were, clearly identified. She admits few outsiders and the arrival of even those select few, with the notable exception of Andrea, she refers to as "an invasion" (P, p.108).

Rather than attempting to encourage something more positive than the segregative and judgemental qualities of society which she has felt so keenly she only seeks to build such tendencies into her own coping strategies and to actively undertake her own process of exclusion. Far from escaping into a milieu free from conscription and prejudice Laura carries these with her into her own little world and compounds the social segregation she has experienced by actively promoting an "us and them" attitude once Andrea joins her on the land. Inside such a "fort" there can be no real reaching across the barriers or dismantling of them for either woman in a social sense as this insular world which Laura has constructed is separatist rather than participatory.

That neither woman is really able to effectively divorce herself from society is also apparent in the way that Laura and Andrea structure their relationship. This is something which neither Laura nor Andrea acknowledge and which John O'Brien in his essay "Myths and Domesticity in the Novels of Elizabeth Jolley" argues against. In Andrea's estimation "There is no way of making comparisons. It's all so very different" (P, p.83). Laura explains to the younger woman at one stage in the novel "Our world together is an isolated one" (P, p.193). However as the relationship develops there is much apparent within it which contradicts the claims of both these women.

In his essay John O'Brien misrepresents the true nature of the relationship and in the manner of the two protagonists fails to really recognise and appreciate the familiar structures which are built into it. He asserts that

In *Palomino* the myth of domesticity is not just attacked but confronted with a truly oppositional
ideology that suggest traditional signs may undergo a kind of dialectic transformation in which traditional myth is reclaimed to become a healthy idyll of feminine friendship.3

The relationship in which the two women find themselves is the result of a perceived clash between native impulse and social conformity for Laura and Andrea. They retreat from the social macrocosm and build a life in which the roles are firmly set, easily recognisable and derive in form from the macrocosm.

Through the changing thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the two women involved one witnesses the unfolding of an exclusive sexual, emotional and domestic relationship between two consenting adults. Within the relationship Andrea and Laura really produce little that is new in terms of the way it is structured, each woman’s role having its origins in the macrocosm of society. Andrea is left alone in the house for the greater part of each day. She occupies her time scrubbing floors and washing clothes. As well as the general business of cleaning and tidying she is occupied with thoughts of her impending motherhood. In the relationship there is a familiar and traditional division of labour with one partner working primarily from within the house and the other working primarily outside it.

Laura “works like a man on her land” (P, p.86). She does much of the manual work on her farm and is described in this role in terms and situations which are traditionally male-oriented. She is “powerful and strong” (P, p.88). She “looks thick-set in her working clothes” (P, p.96). The gold watch she wears is “handsome” (P, p.121). Her kiss when she gives it to Andrea is a “long deep kiss of possession” (P, p.189). When she makes a suggestion to Andrea the younger woman replies laughing “Oh Laura it sounds as is you were proposing marriage to me” (P, p.202). In the ways they have structured and chosen to conduct their relationship these two individuals who have sought to leave society behind have in fact adopted and perhaps modified slightly much of what they were critical of in the macrocosm.
For the narrators in *Palomino* the social macrocosm is irrelevant in terms of the quest to know and be one's true self, to discover *amour propre*. However when considered in combination each woman's separate and fluctuating thoughts, feelings and perceptions paradoxically interweave in such a way as to create an impression which is quite at variance with their individual lines of reasoning. As the tale itself unfolds Laura and Andrea emerge as belonging to the macrocosm of human society. In fact they are but two of several characters in the novel struggling to be human, to be alive, to be themselves and to also find some kind of peace and harmony in their lives.

In the novel Laura mentions a school of thought established but the Egyptian Plotinus and his teacher Ammonius Saccas which is relevant not only to the relationship between the two women as she perceives it but also to Laura and Andrea's quests for ultimate understanding. Andrea recollects Laura explaining to her "when two people love as we do it seems to be the two halves recognizing each other and becoming one. It was the neo-Platonists in the Renaissance who held these views" (*P*, p.194). While Laura's thoughts here obviously relate to her perceptions of the idyllic aspects of her relationship with Andrea the neo-Platonic reference does have a wider relevance in the novel as a whole.

For the neo-Platonists any true appreciation of individuality pushes one toward, rather than away from, a social reckoning within a social context. In *The Significance of Neoplatonism* Harris explains

One discovers oneself as part of the largest possible whole ... The boundaries of the self are those of the intelligible cosmos ... And no genuine Neoplatonist can be satisfied to think of himself as a member of any smaller or more exclusive community.4

Within the novel itself there is a developing and complex social vision which in its entirety belongs to neither of the
narrators although both Laura and Andrea have a hand in its construction. In this vision the individual is placed firmly within the larger framework of things. In terms of the quest for personal insight and inner peace society is recognised as being not only as inescapable but also desirable, serving as a constant source of learning and forcing the individual to extend the limits of her or his life experiences and understanding.

In *Palomino* there is a consideration of society and of the questing individual in relation to society which is conducted almost in spite of the two narrators. Both Laura and Andrea seem to have quite a superficial understanding of society and a limited and unbalanced appreciation of its inhabitants. However the juxtaposing of their individual perceptions curiously provides indications at least that the macrocosm of society is more heterogeneous, the individuals within it more complex and unique than either woman is prepared to allow.

Rodney Glass, a one-time colleague of Laura's, in her estimation belongs very much to the world she repudiates. Although she appreciates his kindness towards her and is grateful to him for offering her a place to stay upon her release from prison she also sees him as being a successful product of the circumscribed culture she rejects. In her opinion the domestic trappings and complacent lifestyle society offers to those who conform are his. When Laura stays at Rodney's house she feels that she is taken into a

world of pastel nylon pleats, plastic dinner sets, small dinner parties with carefully selected company, very good meals, outdoor sports with the children singing and reciting and playing recorders *(P, p. 173).*

Yet elsewhere in the novel one discovers that Rodney, whilst belonging in many ways to the macrocosm of society is also something of a kindred spirit for Laura. He is someone who understands and appreciates who and what she is and can usefully and appropriately point the way for her if ever she cares to listen.
When reading through Laura's diary and past correspondence Andrea comes across some letters sent to Laura by Rodney Glass during a particularly difficult period in her life. Almost in spite of herself Andrea recognises that these are "Tentative letters, surprisingly kind and sensitive, suggesting ways in which [Laura] should rebuild her life" (P, p.186). Andrea’s surprise derives from her appreciating a facet of Rodney’s personality of which she has been hitherto unaware and which is somewhat at odds with her general perception of him. Late in the novel Andrea remembers Rodney in conversation with Laura and telling her “Nothing is sustained in perfection ... There’s good and bad, Laura, you can’t get away from it” (P, p.208). Rodney’s observation here distinguishes him as one person who is at least aware of the central preoccupations shaping Laura’s way of looking at the world and who is willing to discuss it with her openly.

One should be very wary of accepting Laura’s use of absolutes in categorising Rodney’s world. There is enough within the novel to suggest that he is sympathetic with much of what she experiences. With regard to this at a symbolic level his surname is particularly suggestive. In The Sugar Mother the protagonist Edwin Page trying to

peer into the darkness across to the house next door, was only able to see the reflection in the uncurtained window of his own book-lined study and himself and Daphne in seclusion there (SM, p.202).

It may well be that in the “Glass” in Palomino Laura would similarly find reflections of herself if she ever allowed herself to look closely and without prejudice.

What becomes apparent as the novel unfolds is that there are really as many paths towards ultimate understanding and knowledge as there are individuals. Linked to the intimations of the diversity of human nature is a recognition of the various means by which different individuals cope with the demands of being alive and in the process attempt to find what is proper
for them in relation to the world around them. For Laura the choice is either to compromise her self and conform to society’s expectations or to seek a different way of being and knowing removed from the existing social structure. She chooses the latter and systematically works at isolating and insulating herself from the rest of society. Rodney Glass meanwhile, who has more in common with Laura than simply similar professional backgrounds, orders his life from within a social setting whilst still retaining his quintessential otherness. In this way his coping strategies are akin to those of Irma, another minor character in the novel.

Irma’s character is one which is never really explored in great depth and yet just her presence and what one is able to glean of her inner nature distinguishes her as an individual who cannot be dismissed lightly and who also does not fit neatly into Laura and Andrea’s simplistic view of society. Irma has had a difficult life, one characterised by loneliness and suffering. Laura recognises something of this when she muses whilst on board the ship in relation to Irma “I wonder if she has ever suffered as I suffer. I think she has and has overcome it” (P, p.14). Throughout her life Irma’s suffering has served as a source of learning for her, torturing her into discovering and extending the limits of her own understanding.

In a conversation with Irma late in the novel Andrea learns

Irma was in a strange country, a refugee ... Because of the war she had to leave with her youngest child without knowing where her husband and older children were. She thought she would never bear it. And in a strange kitchen she had to wash and dry cups and jugs and things, and with every cup she hung up she said the names of her husband and of her children over and over again, thinking about them all the time and, when the tears came, she felt comforted (P, p.255).

Irma has managed to carve out a niche for herself in an
unfamiliar place under traumatic circumstances. She has a wisdom that is all her own and that Andrea at least gradually comes to appreciate. The younger woman reflects "It's as if (Irma) understands things" (P, p.249).

Irma is a character who has struggled with the problematical aspects of her life - with fear and loneliness and sadness - and who knows that in doing so there is the possibility that "In time one finds what is jost right" (P, p.256). This character during her life has made personal choices which reach across the barriers to happiness in her life as she seeks to build a positive future within a social context.

Thus it becomes apparent from the novel as a whole that there are other individuals in Palomino besides Laura and Andrea who are involved in the struggle to make sense of what at times appears to be a seemingly senseless world and to find a place where they can usefully and purposefully fit. For characters such as Rodney and Irma such a quest clearly involves society. This is in direct contrast to the path which Laura and Andrea feel they have chosen. As they in their own estimation leave society behind and repair to the valley farmlet it is apparent that for both women society is perceived as being at best superfluous and at worst a hindrance in the quest to know and to be one's true self.

However as the novel progresses Laura and Andrea's notions of escaping from society are balanced against an increasing awareness in the mind of this reader at least of the extent to which the macrocosm of society is mirrored in the protagonists' microcosm. Just as for individuals such as Rodney and Irma so too for Laura and Andrea the quest for ultimate understanding and for a sense of belonging involves a constant and ongoing struggle with society and a measure of personal suffering. It is apparent from the individual experiences brought to life within the novel Palomino that the paths people choose to take on their quests are not identical nor do they all yield insights of particular value. Some paths are dead ends and people either despair or start anew, as Andrea does, according to their nature and the forces that
move them. Other individuals, of whom there are some in *Palomino*, never even begin the quest because they find it frightening or irrelevant.

Elizabeth Jolley's fiction offers the reader an exploration of the inner as well as the more public lives of her central characters and always within a social context although this is not always immediately apparent. Such explorations are conducted by the author in ways which are not prescriptive but rather depend to a heightened degree upon the reader's own intellectual and imaginative involvement to shape the text. This is what Delys Bird and Brenda Walker in the preface to *Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays* refer to as

an actively textual quality which requires a creative engagement on the part of the characters who determine their situation in accordance with the narratives which they apply to themselves; and in terms of the reader who negotiates with an open and equivocal text.5

Such an engagement is necessary on the reader's part because of the ways in which Jolley goes about the business of conducting her exploration of each character's anima and persona.

Her characters are never used as mere mouthpieces for Jolley's own particular views of the world or philosophies on life. She also does not break into the text itself with what the writer-character Miss Hailey in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* describes as "even a touch of authorial intrusion" (*MSR*, p.114). The reader is left to observe what each character thinks, feels, says and does and to draw her or his own conclusions. In the end, just as Martin Gray argues in his essay "Surprise in the Novels of Elizabeth Jolley" "we have to decide for ourselves what might happen, what should happen. Closure is denied in the manner of the classic modernist text."6

Jolley's novels characteristically resist providing any conclusions especially in the sense of offering tidy resolutions or stereotyped formulas for the experiences of the alienated
individual. In *Palomino* the novel concludes, for want of a better word, with at least one of the protagonists embarking upon a new beginning while the other is left behind still trying to reconcile the conflicting aspects of her life. Their struggles one senses will take them down differing paths but each one’s quest will be ongoing.

In the fiction of Patrick White a similar emphasis upon the never-ending nature of the search for understanding, for wholeness, for *amour propre* and the diversity of paths the questing individual may take is evident. In *The Aunt’s Story* Theodora Goodman tells Gertie Stepper at the outset of the novel “I would like to know ... I would like to know everything.” In her search for ultimate knowledge she emerges as one of White’s “burnt ones” whose experiences and insights provide an unsettling contrast to those who can indeed fit the existing world of human society. The epigraph to the final section titled “Holstius” focuses on the question of sanity. In this section Theodora submits to the demands of society and leaves the mountain top to be taken to a lunatic asylum. Just before this happens however one learns that there is “no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman.” Her inner life which offers her immense possibilities for self-knowledge is characterised by the phoenix image of the rose trembling and glittering. It will not be quelled and her search will go on.

Like Jolley, White is interested in the experiences of the social misfits, the individuals who differ from the norm, those “few stubborn ones [who] will blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward.” In the novel *Voss* the questing characters take different paths. The search for the explorer Voss leads him into the desert in central Australia. Laura Trevelyan pursues her quest for understanding in the midst of the European “huddle” of society. The former convict Judd accompanies Voss on his expedition. At the end of the novel Laura meets Judd and

His large hands, in the absence of their former strength, moved in almost perpetual search for some reassuring object or position, just as the
expressions were shifting on his face, like water over the sand.\textsuperscript{12}

His wandering hands and changing demeanour suggest that for him, as for Laura and Andrea, the search is not yet over.

Late in the novel \textit{Palomino} both Laura and Andrea acknowledge and finally accept that, at least for the younger woman, the quest to find some inner peace and harmony involves a social reckoning within a social context. However in the time the two women spend together and the relationship they share neither one recognises the extent to which the macrocosm of society has been ever-present in their tiny world. Laura and Andrea consider that they have effectively divorced themselves from the rest of society and yet what emerges from the novel as a whole reveals the fallacies in this line of reasoning. One is reminded of D.H. Lawrence's maxim "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale"\textsuperscript{13} as in \textit{Palomino} each woman's fragments of thought and feeling interweave to create a lager picture, to form an image of the alienated self in relation to society rather than removed from it.

Jolley has stated "I write about human beings and their needs and feelings. This must involve society and morality."\textsuperscript{14} Although many of her characters perceive themselves as being detached from society her writing works in such a way as to uncover the fundamental and dependent relationship between the microcosms in which these characters live and the outside world. As the tale, to use Lawrence's term, unfolds the tellers are re-cast in a social setting in worlds which are revealed as but integral parts of society as a whole.

Throughout her \textit{oeuvre} Jolley's characters are witnessed struggling and trying to find ways to cope with their own failures as well as the the failures of the other people around them. As a group her characters share with the literary character Laura Rambotham some general sense of social unfitness. For Laura in \textit{The Getting of Wisdom} this is expressed as "the uncomfortable sense of being a square peg, which fitted into none of the round holes of her world."\textsuperscript{15} Like Laura Rambotham, Jolley's protagonists search for a place where
they can “dance to their own tune”, seeking their own special niche in the world. Such a preoccupation in the work of an author writing from within Australian society is certainly not novel as there are many such writers who have set about the task of imaginatively realising the experiences of the individual who does not conform socially and is marginalised because of this.

Ken Gelder in his essay “The Novel” gives a comprehensive account of a range of Australian novels exploring the experiences of the alienated self in society. In the novel *Milk and Honey* Jolley conveys the sense of dislocation, loneliness and loss experienced by a family of Viennese immigrants in Australia who cling obsessively to one another and to the European traditions with which they are familiar. The particular experiences and struggles of migrants in Australia have also featured in works such as Judah Waten’s *Distant Land*, Rosa Cappiello’s *Oh Lucky Country* and Antigone Kefala’s *The Island*. Jolley’s study of mainly elderly and infirm, and profoundly vulnerable, individuals institutionalised in *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* is reminiscent of Patrick White’s novels *The Eye of the Storm* and *Memoirs of Many in One* and David Ireland’s *The Flesheaters*. In each of these novels human beings are categorised as social misfits owing to their age or their lack of employment, marginalised and confined.

In his essay Gelder mentions several contemporary novelists who have used the image of artist-as-misfit in their writing. The character Frank Harland in David Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre*, the central character Duffield in Patrick White’s novel *The Vivisector* and Jolley’s Miss Hailey in *Mr Scobies Riddle* are all creative identities living on the edge of society. Gelder also places Jolley’s use of the sexual deviant in her writing in the context of the work of other Australian authors when he observes

Lesbian love has been the subject of Elizabeth Riley’s *All That False Instruction* (1975), Beverly Farmer’s *Alone* (1980) and Elizabeth Jolley’s *Palomino* (1980) - indeed most of Jolley’s novels explore the sexual attraction one woman (usually
older, more possessive) has for another.\textsuperscript{19}

Clearly Jolley's interest in the experiences of the alienated individual in society and her thematic concerns of human loneliness and need and vulnerability are far from unique in Australian literature. Rather it is apparent that she is writing from within a quite well-established tradition but that within this tradition she takes her place alongside such authors as Patrick White, Henry Handel Richardson and David Malouf as a most accomplished writer.
NOTES


8. The Olive Schreiner epigraph to section three of The Aunt's Story reads "When your life is most real, to me you are mad." (The Aunt's Story, p.253).


Chapter 3. Negotiating the Bridge and the Abysm with Reference to *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and *Milk and Honey*

In her book *Liars: New Australian Novelists* Helen Daniel explains that "The journey in search of identity has long been a theme of Australian fiction." It has certainly been an evident thematic concern in the works of such authors as Patrick White, David Malouf, Christina Stead, Randolph Stow and Elizabeth Jolley. Characters such as Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt's Story*, Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*, Rick Maplestead in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the poet Ovid in *An Imaginary Life*, Jacob in *Milk and Honey* and the three male octogenarians in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* are all social outcasts. They are also all, in their own ways, searching for a sense of identity and belonging. Their quest is to find or to reclaim a positive sense of personal, sexual, spiritual or cultural identity and to find places where it is possible for them to experience inner peace and harmony. Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* reflects at one stage late in the novel

> What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become.²

The suggestion here is that the quest for a sense of identity and belonging is an ongoing and often painful personal struggle. For the questing individual any progression towards the attainment of such understanding, such knowledge is firmly rooted in the realities of human suffering and experience.

In Jolley's writing many of the principal characters do gain access to worlds where they experience a positive sense of identity and a true sense of belonging. Often because the way has been imaginatively prepared, as it is in *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, the reader is able to mentally accompany them on their journey towards finding inner peace and harmony in life.
However her writing does show signs of a certain intellectual unevenness at times in this area. Occasionally, as with Jacob in *Milk and Honey*, a protagonist is discovered simply and inexplicably discarding what is for him or her a complex and problematical world fraught with pain and confusion with as much ease as one would throw off an unwanted jacket and arriving with corresponding rapidity in a world of ultimate insight and understanding. When this happens the reader may well be left stranded, baulking at the intellectual and moral abysm separating the two worlds and bewildered by the speed and apparent effortlessness with which the change has been effected.

In the novel *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* one encounters characters of great need and considerable fragility. Jolley explores the plight of these people and their individual and generally private solutions to the problems they encounter and the predicaments in which they find themselves whilst living in The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude. In an interview for *Scripsi* in which Jolley discusses what she considers would have been her late father’s reaction to *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* she explains “I don’t think he would have disapproved of Scobie at all, because he would understand the celebration of life and death.” In this novel Jolley celebrates the individual responses and solutions of the inmates to the chaos and corruption they experience in the present within the nursing home, the profound vulnerability and wisdom of the elderly people and the powerful emancipatory possibilities of their imaginative inner worlds which they create and in which they increasingly seek refuge.

The various worlds imaginatively realised in *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* are worlds which the reader comes to know very well in terms of their genesis, their physical and emotional texture and the ways of access to and egress from them. Much time is spent defining the situation as it exists in the present within the confines of the Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude. It becomes quite clear that characters such as Mr Scobie, Mr Hughes and Mr Privett have arrived in this world not of their own volition and have all experienced feelings of displacement and loss. For all three men the circle of their former world,
secure and familiar, has altered dramatically with the influences of self-interest and greed within their immediate families bringing about the changes in each instance.

Once inside the hospital these three octogenarian men find themselves locked together in circumstances not of their own choosing with similarly frail, frightened and confused elderly people. As a group the inmates resemble the doves roosting in the Moreton Bay fig tree across the road from the institution. The hospital itself is "like a big tree with everyone resting in the branches" (MSR, p.50). By association the elderly patients are to compared with those beautiful "Grey and silver pearled and pink edged doves, with tender feathers, (disappearing) into the dark branches" (MSR, p.50). Matron Price, ostensibly in charge of the institution, is like the hawk which Mr Hughes observes whilst sitting on a chair on the verandah. He watches a hawk hovering in the sky and notes that its presence unsettles the doves and they rise "in a crackling cloud, agitated, disturbed, distressed, frightened" (MSR, p.31). Within the Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude Matron Price is "like a bird of prey hovering" (MSR, p.52). Her presence creates a similar emotional disturbance in the lives of her patients, compounding their feelings of confusion and insecurity whenever she comes into contact with them.

Given their estrangement and isolation from the outside world, their age and their vulnerability characters such as Mr Scobie, Mr Hughes and Mr Privett struggle to find the strength or the way to ameliorate their present situation. Actual physical escape is not possible and so they seek out alternative means of escape. Whilst "taking part" in the everyday chaos of the nursing hospital they also seek refuge in the past, finding moments of stillness and peace and a sense of belonging in inner worlds removed from the turbulence of the present situation.

The coexistence or coalescing of real and imagined worlds in Mr Scobie's Riddle calls to mind Section Two of Patrick White's novel The Aunt's Story in which there is a similar breaking down of the boundaries between imagination and reality. In White's novel Section Two places the
protagonist Theodora in decadent Europe between the two World Wars where she lives in the Hotel du Midi on the French Riviera. This section, titled “Jardin Exotique”, is primarily concerned with the nature of reality and illusion. The patrons of the exotic garden live in a world in which memories and dreams are more real to them than the reality they inhabit. Similarly in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* the chaotic outer world often appears to be more unreal than the vibrant inner worlds the characters create for themselves.

In these subjective inner worlds, each fashioned in its own unique way and with its own distinctive characteristics, the three elderly men re-create and re-discover something of their former lives of work and love. In an aptly titled review “No One Ever Manages to Break Out of This Old Folk's Home” C. K. Stead notes “Mr Hughes's bricks, Mr Privett's pet poultry and Mr Scobie's hill are like flavours or essences of life carried with them into the enforced limbo of the hospital.” These three men gain access to these inner and generally comforting worlds through the interplay of memory, imagination and desire.

As one progresses through the novel *Mr Scobie's Riddle* it is possible to come to know and to think of these characters not just in terms of their existence in the present but increasingly as they imagine themselves in their private worlds. Until the point of death the three men are not able to completely throw off the outside world. They are repeatedly faced with the inevitability of having to return to the confusion and confinement of the nursing hospital. However their imaginative engagement with their inner worlds intensifies the longer they are inmates of the institution, assuming an increasing dominance in their lives. Helen Daniel recognises this when she writes in her book *Liars: Australian New Novelists*

As the outer chaos batters at them, Jolley sustains the fragile patterns of remembrance of each of the three men, which are brief images of freedom and dignity. There is a poignance in their yearning and loss which deepens as the outer chaos engulfs
They seek out these inner worlds more and more in order to experience, albeit intermittently, a sense of belonging and to know peace and harmony once more.

Each man's revisiting of and increasing reliance upon his subjective world is a precursor to his journey towards a world following his death which is comparable to the inner world created in terms of the inner peace and harmony it affords each individual and which reassuringly contains many of the stored mental images which have consoled each man throughout his life. The way has been imaginatively prepared for each character and thus the pilgrimage beyond the point of death can be expressed as a continuation and certainly as an extension of the many excursions Mr Privett, Mr Hughes and Mr Scobie have made into their own private little worlds.

Mr Hughes, after collapsing in the hallway of The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude, is conveyed to the City and District Hospital by ambulance and pronounced dead on arrival. Whilst travelling in the ambulance, and provocatively there is no way of determining whether this occurs before or after he could be certified dead, Mr Hughes listens "to the bricks talking softly, whispering and muttering and chattering to themselves" (MSR, p. 104). As always in his mind these bricks and the noises they make remind him of his wife and her six sisters. The very last thought of Mr Hughes' to which the reader is privy is that he can "hear them, all the time, talking talking talking" (MSR, p. 104). The final impression is not that of a man alone and frightened but rather of Mr Hughes drawing closer and closer to these women. The insistent repetition of the verb "talking" together with the absence of the use of a comma to create any kind of pause heightens the impression one receives that these comforting voices upon which Mr Hughes relies for solace will not be silenced.

Mr Scobie departs from The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude with a psalm and a smile. Death for the Christian Mr Scobie is something he understands, accepts and anticipates as something inevitable and potentially
redemptive. His death is characteristically framed by two of the many religious verses he has committed to memory and which inform his approach to death.

In the surrealist scene associated with Mr Privett's death the elderly man is visited by an amiable stranger in a dark suit who comes in response to an advertisement Mr Privett has written out offering for sale his "old man's body" (MSR, p. 106). The two men strike a deal and Mr Privett leaves the nursing home on his own terms and to the tune of his own distinctive brand of music

HEP DUCK RATTLE TAP TAP HEP HEPPY HEP DUCK
HEP DUCK SHAKE DUCK RATTLE AND ROLL DUCK
HEP HEP HEP DUCK (MSR, p. 108).

His departure is characterised by its tranquility. He is "surprisingly comfortable" (MSR, p. 108) and the "gentle swaying" (MSR, p. 108) resulting from being carried in some wooden construction by four men is "restful"(MSR, p. 108). For Mr Privett, as for Mr Hughes and Mr Scobie, there is finally no sense of fear or agony or confusion involved in his death.

When discussing the three men's deaths in the interview for Scripsi Jolley describes the loss of life as being "all very acceptable, inevitable and acceptable." The men's deaths are acceptable and for a variety of reasons. It is of course pleasing that these elderly people do not suffer at the point of death and reassuring given the humanity which we all share. However, and more importantly if one is to find the novel itself convincing as distinct from simply soothing, given what has been uncovered during the celebration of these men's lives the reader may well be imaginatively predisposed to accept at an intellectual and moral level the paths they take beyond the point of death.

In the book Facing Writers David Malouf explains

Imagination's it! I mean you can get so much from the facts and a couple of details may convince people of the reality of the situation, but
ultimately everything has to be imagined. And it's only in the reader's imagination that it will ever become real. And unless the writer can imagine it in a way that allows the reader's imagination to work, nothing happens at all.7

In *Mr Scobie's Riddle* it is possible to imagine the experiences of the three men at the point of death. They have been witnessed numerous times throughout the novel having similar experiences, travelling along similar, if not identical, paths to the ones they now take.

Mr Hughes, Mr Privett and Mr Scobie have all been observed "leaving" the troublesome and chaotic world of the nursing hospital and being mentally transported through the combination of imagination and memory into private worlds which offer them some respite and in which they are able to re-discover, if only fleetingly, inner peace and harmony. Being still physically bound, as it were, to The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude none of the men are able to effect a complete escape. Their interludes of reverie and recollection are repeatedly interrupted during life as the outside world intrudes and they are mentally dragged back to the confusion and chaos of the present. At the point of death when the physical tie is severed it is thematically appropriate that each of these men will now move on to the other infinitely more peaceful and in many ways comfortingly familiar spheres of existence. The way has been imaginatively prepared for one to be able to accept, to find convincing, each man's peri-mortal experiences. Such experiences have already been realised, at least in part, in the moments each man has spent in his subjective inner world.

Not all Jolley's writing however is as intellectually convincing, as imaginatively realised as this. In the author's note to *Five Acre Virgin* Jolley makes a comment about the first six stories in the collection which is relevant to the body of her work. She writes "I have tried to present the human being overcoming the perplexities and difficulties of living" (*FAV*, p. 9). In both her short stories and novels there is at times a certain intellectual glibness apparent in the writing
with the complex and problematical aspects of life being overcome in ways which are quite improbable or in ways which are simply left unexplained. These weaknesses in her writing are evident in the short story "A Gentleman's Agreement" (FAV, pp. 26 - 32) and in the novels The Sugar Mother and Milk and Honey.

"A Gentleman's Agreement" presents the often depressing details of the lives of a mother and her son and daughter as seen through the eyes of the daughter. The mother cleans flats for a living and one learns "Mother had such a hard life and we lived in such a cramped and squalid place" (FAV, p. 29). Upon the death of her father Mother finds that she has a house and eighty-seven acres to sell. The family goes out to the farm to prepare it for sale and in the time they spend there a change comes over the recalcitrant son, the long-suffering mother and the narrator too. The daughter explains

We all three, Mother and myself and my brother, went out at the weekend to tidy things up .... 'I do believe he's laughing! He's happy!' Mother just stared at him and she looked so happy too. I don't think I ever saw the country look so lovely before (FAV, p. 30).

Such a transformation in relation to her family makes the mother disinclined to part with the land or the house. In the ensuing meeting with the doctor who is buying her property and the lawyer who is representing him the mother is able to effect quite an amazing coup. It is agreed upon that she will be able to retain the use of the land and the house for as long as it takes her to plant one crop of an unspecified type and have it mature. The crop which Mother has in mind to plant, but which she does not have to disclose, is a jarrah forest. To this end "The doctor made the lawyer write out a special clause which they all signed. And then we left, everyone satisfied" (FAV, p. 31). It is a fairy-tale ending to the short story. If one tries to read it at a more realistic level than this the ending of the story is far from satisfactory as it is really impossible to be convinced by, to believe in, the way Mother so effortlessly resolves many of the difficulties present in her
life. If one does not accept that such an ending really does belong to the realm of fairy-tales then one can only wonder at the doctor, and the lawyer too following a short outburst, being so compliant and so easily duped.

In terms of stretching the limits of one's credulity "A Gentleman's Agreement" has much in common with the novel The Sugar Mother. In this novel the central character Edwin Page is often given to wondering about the kind of life he and his wife Cecilia, who is overseas on twelve months study leave, share. He muses at one stage

If he and Cecilia had had children, if they had a daughter, would their lives, life itself, be different? Would there be more meaning in the antics which were part of the performance of daily living? Or would it simply be a different set of antics as meaningless as these present ones? (SM, p. 107).

This quest of Edwin's to find some kind of purpose in his life leaves him open to the conniving of his next-door neighbour Mrs Bott and her daughter Leila, both of whom insinuate their way into his life.

It is not long before Edwin Page, university lecturer, becomes involved in a surrogacy arrangement with the plump, plain and in all likelihood already pregnant Leila at Mrs Bott's suggestion,

"I'm saying", Leila's mother said, "Leila would oblige with carrying for you and Dr Sissily. It's being done all over the place now. It's quite the thing these days (SM, p. 124).

Leila is the "sugar mother" of the story and Edwin, as he becomes increasingly obsessed with Leila, steps into the role of sugar daddy. By the time the baby arrives "sooner than expected" (SM, p. 183) Edwin has become the main provider for both Leila and her mother as well as for the newly-born baby. The two women leave with the surrogacy fee paid by Edwin
Page in their possession and clad in expensive fur coats he has bought for them. It is extremely difficult to accept imaginatively and intellectually when reading The Sugar Mother that a learned university professor could be so easily and so comprehensively manipulated and deceived by the calculating Mrs Bott and her daughter.

Just as unconvincing is the transformation which occurs in the life of the protagonist Jacob in Milk and Honey. In this novel the reader is imaginatively led into an exploration of a life characterised and profoundly influenced by fears and obsessions, violence, deception, waste and destruction. One follows the course of such a complex and problematical life to discover it, glibly and unconvincingly, coming to rest in the last few pages of the work in a mood of equipoise, of optimism and complete understanding within the grounds of the mental hospital. As Lucy Frost notes in her essay “A Monstrous Sweetness: The Narratives of Milk and Honey” by the end of the novel “Waldemar has changed and so has Jacob.” The changes which have taken place in Waldemar are largely attributable to him now in the mental hospital, being given proper medical treatment. As Jacob tells Norman it was really fear of medicine and fear of being poor that prevented Waldemar from having any kind of life. And now, though he’s in here, he’s closer to life than a great many people (MH, p. 184).

Jacob’s own transformation is far less easily explained. There can be no doubt that it has taken place as one observes him in his new-found world of peace and harmony. However one is at a loss to know how these changes have been effected and so quickly too. In this way Jacob resembles the character Alethea Hunt in David Ireland’s novel A Woman of the Future in which she too undergoes a quite startling metamorphosis. In Who Is She P. K. Elkin discusses A Woman of the Future and argues that the protagonist Alethea Hunt is not really convincing as a projection of young Australian womanhood, especially in view of the author’s “Abracadabra” at the end, when he has
Alethea turn into a leopard and disappear somewhere in the Blue Mountains.9

Jolley's ending of *Milk and Honey* is similarly short-cut, contrived and convenient. One is left puzzling over how this character who likens himself to "an animal in a cage" (*MH*, p. 74) has gained his freedom from his former life of pain and turmoil and fear. There is an intellectual and moral abyss separating the two worlds and the way in which Jacob has managed to cross over, to bridge the gulf which exists between them is simply glossed over and neither imaginatively realised nor intimated within the text.

Following the fire which destroys the structure of his life as he has hitherto known it Jacob is presented with the opportunity to start again, to at least begin a process of correction in his own life. In this sense he resembles the pianist at the start of the novel "faltering, and after a pause, starting again" (*MH*, p. 11). However the process of correcting his life is quite different to that of the student correcting a piece of music. He cannot simply replay his life, that is to retrace his steps to boyhood and re-discover the harmony of his life on his father's vineyard. Another possibility presents itself to him, a possibility which has far more to do with the life he has known with the Heimbachs than it does with finding new ways of seeing and knowing.

On his first excursion to the mental hospital with Leopold, Jacob has to cross the wasteland area. For the boy it is a place of "indescribable horror" (*MH*, p. 37), a diseased, stinking, desolate place. Between the dead cats and dogs he observes people scavenging through all the rubbish and he experiences feelings of utter revulsion. Years later he drives past the same area and notices that the wasteland has been reclaimed and turned into a park. In the process of the land reclamation which has been undertaken Jacob perceives a possible way of correcting or transforming his own life. He reflects

Perhaps the rubbish in a person's life could be pushed somewhere beneath a smooth skin. Perhaps
a shining and elastic skin could grow and, in place of a decrepit human being, there could be something radiant and glowing (MH, p. 175).

It is a thought which obviously appeals to and consoles him and one to which he returns whilst resting in the grounds of the mental hospital. This time however he relates this process specifically to his own life rather than conjecturing in general terms. He muses

Perhaps the terror and failure of my life could, in some way, be smoothed over like the swamp had been levelled and drained and combed and planted. Perhaps a fine, smooth skin could cover the misery I had now. Perhaps I could start again with all the experience packed under the skin (MH, p. 179).

That such cosmetic solutions to the problems characterising his life initially appeal to Jacob is hardly surprising given that the notion of concealment has been central to his experiences of life within the Heimbachs' household.

Jacob finding in the process of land reclamation an external correlative for the possible transformation of his own life signals the extent to which, even after so many years have elapsed, his perceptions of himself and of the path it is appropriate his life should take are coloured by his experiences in the Heimbachs' household. During his time with Leopold, Jacob has listened to the older man praising with hyperbole his student's musical ability. Leopold tells the young Jacob "You are virtuoso" (MH, p. 35) and refers to him being "the Prince of the cello" throughout the novel. As an adult Jacob still relates these perceptions to himself without questioning the accuracy of them. When surveying the park area late in the novel Jacob muses "I should be a prince" (MH, p. 175). He is still all too ready to accept the vision of himself which Leopold has created for him rather than to seek what is proper for himself.

In Jacob's mind the transformation of the wasteland into "A Prince of a Park" (MH, p. 175) kindles the possibility of him
being transformed in a similar fashion from "the thing (he) had become" (MH, p. 175) into "A Prince of a Fellow" (MH, p. 175). Although he has physically escaped from the insular world of the Heimbachs he is not yet mentally free to choose for himself and is still attracted by "solutions" to his dilemmas which are in keeping with the coping strategies he has witnessed and practised himself whilst living with the Heimbachs.

In this household obsessive family mores are hidden from the outside world, concealed beneath a pathologically clean and tidy, cultivated exterior. In this milieu such complex problems of existence as insanity, incest and murder are also covered over rather than being openly and humanely acknowledged and confronted. Waldemar's whereabouts are concealed, after his staged murder, by the rest of the family and this single act of deception profoundly affects the quality of his life and the lives of those around him. Tante Rosa's extensive injuries resulting from the fire are also hidden from the outside world. A doctor is never summoned and Jacob remembers that in a quiet, narrow bed "Tante Rose lay, burned to death, though we did not realise it at first" (MH, p. 151). She dies an agonising death. No professional assistance is sought for Jacob's injuries either even though he realises that "Without proper treatment (his) hand would be disfigured, destroyed and useless" (MH, p. 150). It is simply dressed by Louise and covered with a clean bandage. The operations of the Heimbachs' household hinge upon concealment and deception with the covering-up of what is painful and ugly in their lives only leading ultimately to a worsening of the situation rather than its amelioration.

Seen in context Jacob's entertaining of the notion of concealing the problematical and painful aspects of his life and becoming a "Prince of a Fellow" with all the misery of his life buried within him is part of the moral falsity characterising the life he has known with the Heimbachs. It is important to realise that Jacob does not finally attempt to "transform" his life in this way. It is clear in the final pages of the novel that he rejects the possibility of ever finding lasting peace and harmony in his life through attempting to
apply the principles of land reclamation to his own troubled life. He says

I want you to know Norman ... I could never ever have been what Leopold said I was. He used to call me a Prince of the cello. Now I realise that he did not really believe that himself. I am glad to realise it in time (MH, p. 184).

Disappointingly however it is never made clear or even satisfactorily suggested how he progresses from this realisation to the stage of ultimate understanding and insight in which one discovers him as the novel ends.

Jacob apparently confronts rather than attempting to conceal his inner "swamp" in the concluding pages of the novel. The process of confrontation and reconciliation are not explored but one assumes that they must have taken place and been effected with considerable rapidity and ease for a transformation is quickly apparent in the protagonist's life. In a matter of a few short weeks and in the space of but two pages in the novel this self-absorbed and selfish character evolves into a compassionate and loving human being who is now able to perceive himself and the world around him with penetrating insight and understanding. Whilst sitting with Norman at the mental hospital Jacob thinks "I'd like to tell Norman that suddenly now in these last few weeks everything seems clear to me" (MH, p. 182). In this instance it is possible to observe Jacob in his new-found world of ultimate understanding and inner peace but it is extremely difficult either to comprehend or to imagine how such a change has been effected.

When discussing the conclusion to the novel Milk and Honey Elizabeth Jolley explains "It's a bit of a golden dawn at the end."10 In the final pages of the novel the protagonist recognises the dead-end path, which he has been thinking of following in order to change his life, for what it is and rejects it. Then quite inexplicably he is discovered within the grounds of the mental hospital at peace with himself and in harmony with everything around him. For Jacob at this time
"everything is outlined clearly and yet polished and softened" (MH, p. 182). The transformation as such is both surprising and morally simplistic given the highly complex and essentially problematical life which has been laid bare during the exploration. One is left baulking at the intellectual and moral abyss which exists between the world Jacob has left behind and the infinitely more serene one he has entered and mystified by his sudden appearance in the latter.

Elizabeth Jolley's fiction explores the experiences of those individuals searching for a sense of personal identity, for their own niche, for what is appropriate for the self, in a society in which they feel they do not belong. For characters such as Mr Scobie, Mr Hughes and Mr Privett of Mr Scobie's Riddle, Jacob of Milk and Honey, Laura and Andrea of Palomino and the confused and tearful Vera of My Father's Moon life is essentially and often painfully problematical as they struggle to cope with the constant demands and accommodations of being human, being alive and being alienated from the rest of society.

At its best Jolley's writing reveals the complexity of each character's quest and the diversity of paths which may be traversed in the pursuit of inner peace and harmony. In terms of Jolley's writing such a quest involves the recognition and exploration of one's quintessential self, one's own sexuality, spirituality, humanity, what you will. The quest also entails an understanding of conventional social mores, stereotypes and institutionalised structures. For the individual attempting to resolve the problems of one's existence the quest holds the promise of mental anguish, emotional solitariness and devastating personal experience. Perhaps this is why, as Vera's father in Cabin Fever explains,

In spite of not knowing, human individuals went along living their lives baffled when they questioned. But mostly, he said, people questioned only on a superficial level if they questioned at all (CF, p. 236).

However just as the quest spells suffering it also holds the
possibility of the individual ultimately achieving a real sense of personal wholeness and belonging and gaining profound insights and understandings in relation to themselves and society.

Jolley's exploration of the experiences of the social outcast and the means by which such an individual manages to overcome the problems in her or his life is at times intellectually and imaginatively quite disappointing. Evident in such works as the short story "A Gentleman's Agreement" and the novel The Sugar Mother is a tendency towards oversimplification and improbability and in Milk and Honey a certain moral and psychological glibness. In her writing there is also a heuristic bias which is often very powerful and allows the reader to discover, to imaginatively comprehend for one's self and to arrive at a point of heightened understanding. As the writer-character Miss Porch explains it is not necessary for the writer to write absolutely every detail belonging to the characters ... Readers ... can piece things together in rapid retrospect. Imagination ... in the reader must not be overlooked as endless pictures can fill the reader's mind from what the writer offers. A great deal ... of understanding comes from the reader (FB, pp. 167 - 8).

There are occasions however when Jolley simply does not offer her readers enough for them to really begin to participate in the act of imagining. In the novel Milk and Honey for instance in relation to Jacob's transformation she does not provide the necessary cognitive signposts which would allow one to imaginatively comprehend how the protagonist has managed to move from a profoundly troubled realm of experience into a new, enlightened and harmonious one. In her exploration of the experiences of the questing individual in society her writing is intellectually decidedly uneven.
NOTES


Chapter 4. Time Schemes Governing The Exploration in *Mr Scobie's Riddle*.

The celebration of the co-existence and often coalescing of differing worlds using a complex dual referencing of time is a characteristic feature of Elizabeth Jolley's narratives. However it is not correct to assume that it is also something which is unique to her fiction as there are several Australian writer similarly explore ways of apprehending time in their poetry and prose. In an interview with Dagmar Strauss the writer David Malouf articulates his perceptions of time and their expression in his work using his own distinctive metaphors. He states

I'm not sure that the way we see time is the way it is - that is, I don't believe it is necessarily chronological. So I think of characters existing in some kind of flux that's more like soup than being on an escalator.¹

Like Malouf other writers too demonstrate a developing and quite complex apprehension of time in their work. In the process of attempting to comprehend the complexities of Elizabeth Jolley's dual referencing of time it is instructive to compare her work with that of such writers as Kenneth Slessor, David Ireland, Randolph Stow and Patrick White. In their writing all of these artists use time imaginatively to recreate the past and the present, developing themes of growth, change and decay and exploring worlds fashioned through the interplay of memory and fantasy as well as the more prosaic world of everyday human experience.

In David Ireland's novel *The Flesheaters* the would-be writer Scotty asks the question in relation to the book he wishes to write "And what sort of time will be in it? Clocktime or mantime?"² Implicit in this character's question is the assumption that there is some fundamental incompatibility between what he chooses to refer to as
"clocktime" and "mantine" - the former presumably being associated with the passage of hours, minutes and seconds which can be mechanically measured and the latter with a more subjective referencing of time. In her fiction Jolley does not choose one "sort" of time and disregard the other but rather effectively employs a dual referencing of time.

Jolley's recognition and counterbalancing of the timebound with that which is timeless in her fiction has much in common with Kenneth Slessor's poem "Out of Time". In this poem Slessor draws upon his most characteristic image of flux the sea. In the first sonnet he writes "So Time, the wave, enfolds me in its bed." It is an image which is evoked again in the third and concluding sonnet but not before the experience of a subjective moment spent "out of time" is described,

The moment's world, it was; and I was part,
Fleshless and ageless, changeles and made free.
"Fool, would you leave this country?" cried my heart,
But I was taken by the suck of the sea.

The moment is one of perfection and completeness experienced beyond the flux of time. It is also an extremely fragile moment experienced during the stillness between the breaking of two waves and can only be short-lived. In Jolley's writing there is a similar juxtaposing of the timeless with the timebound worlds hr fiction creates. Her exploration is conducted using seemingly contradictory linear and circular narrative impulses which are at times disconcerting but which are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are integral parts of the one whole finely dove-tailed to facilitate her exploration of the commonality of human experience as well as of individual human thoughts, feelings and actions.

Novels of Elizabeth Jolley's such as *My Father's Moon*, *Milk and Honey*, *Cabin Fever*, *Foxybaby*, *The Well* and *Mr Scobie's Riddle* feature a dual time scheme involving both a linear and looping mode of narration. In her writing the linear impulse is primarily associated with her exploration of the
more prosaic aspects of her characters' lives, firmly rooted as they are within the world of time and change. Using it she uncovers the day-to-day occurrences and absurdities of human life, the fundamental isolation of human beings from one another and the commonality of human experience particularly in relation to vulnerability, mortality and the external responses to the aging process and to death. The recurring circularity in her narratives recasts the characters in peculiarly timeless worlds, exploring the values and the pleasures of human subjectivity and imaginatively realising each character's profound need for those individual fantasies and memories which often constitute the only protection from a world with which she or he finds it increasingly difficult to cope.

For Jolley people are valuable, terribly vulnerable and they are all pursued by time. Joan Kirkby in a discussion of the novel Miss Peabody's Inheritance makes some general observations about Jolley's fiction noting

the modernist strand of Jolley's writing, the formally complex, anti-linear, self-conscious experimentation with point of view, and the representation of inward states of consciousness.4

While Dr Kirkby's remarks are in the main quite sensible and accurate one has only to consider in some detail the novel Mr Scobie's Riddle to demonstrate that it is both misrepresenting and underestimating Jolley's exploration of various worlds - some timebound and other timeless - to categorise her work as being "anti-linear". Rather the sense of time irrevocably passing is a quintessential element of Jolley's writing.

For most, if not all, readers the presentation within a work of the linear progression of time and of individual characters journeying through life and towards death will not be unfamiliar nor be cause in itself for undue comment. It is a generally unsurprising method of time referencing common in literature as well as in much of one's experience of life. In the autobiographical Myself When Young Henry Handel Richardson
reflects upon the bitter realisation that to live meant to change. No matter how fast one clung, how jealously one tried to stem the flow, in time all things changed and passed.\(^5\)

In the opinion of the critic Geoffrey Dutton "Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells' is undoubtedly the most famous modern Australian poem."\(^6\) In this poem the irrevocable passing of time is measured by the "bells./Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out."\(^7\) While within a literary context the representation of the linear progression of time may be quite commonplace given Dr Kirkby's assertion it is also something which merits some consideration in relation to the work of Elizabeth Jolley.

In Jolley's writing it is in the evocation of the timebound world and the charting of the remorseless and linear progression of time that she is able to begin exploring some of the most fundamental conditions of human existence, change, loss and death. The complex time referencing in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* works at one level to firmly establish the existence and explore the effects of the world of time and change in the lives of the characters. In this novel Elizabeth Jolley explores the turbulent and depressing world of the Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude. In its physical and emotional textures this world bears more than a passing resemblance to the untidy and unjust world evoked so memorably and disturbingly in *The Flesheaters*. The nursing hospital of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and the dilapidated boarding house-cum-asylum of Ireland's *The Flesheaters* are geographically similarly positioned, the former at "a meeting place of three roads" (*MSR*, p.13) and the latter "on a tongue of land where three roads met."\(^8\) In both novels the institutions offer a place for those individuals unwanted in society and largely excluded from it. In *The Flesheaters* the individuals are vulnerable to social marginalisation because of their lack of employment and because of their poverty. In *Mr Scobie's Riddle* the inmates' vulnerability derives in the main from their old age. As a reader one is made painfully aware of the corruption apparent
and the cruelties inflicted within these institutions ostensibly created to protect and shelter the occupants and of the parasitical inclinations and grasping behaviour of people such as Matron Price and the landlord O'Grady.

In the linear thrust of Mr Scobie's Riddle Jolley sets about the task of identifying the processes of change and loss constantly at work in the lives of her elderly and vulnerable characters. With the onset of old age there is a gradual loss of robust health, of financial independence and of physical and mental faculties observable to varying degrees in the patients which often does occur as part of the aging process. However the withering lifelessness of the institution itself and the ways in which The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude's potent, oppressive and pervasive influence on the patients' lives hastens the process cannot be overlooked.

In such a milieu the inmates experience many changes and losses. As scene builds upon scene the reader's awareness of the materialistic motivations and calculating actions of relatives and of people in positions of authority heightens. One is reminded of Yossarian's observation in Catch-22 when he states "When I look up I see people cashing in. I don't see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy." It becomes clear that the greed and self-interest of others have ensured many of the patients a place at the nursing hospital, rather than simply the effects of old age as influences from within and without the hospital consistently work to erode the inmates' autonomy.

Within the institution the patients experience a loss of dignity and individuality as they are daily "tossed from the bathroom ... stuffed ... into their clothes ... and stacked ... on pieces of plastic, in cane chairs, along the verandah" (MSR, p.49). The elderly people experience the loss of any real sense of personal worth after obviously having led purposeful and industrious lives in the past. They are made to feel a burden to those around them. As Mrs Rawlings tells Martin Scobie, "You old folk, you're all the same. A great trial to yourselves and to
others!" (MSR, p.188). For Mr Scobie his room is "like a prison cell" (MSR, p.130). His imprisonment entails the loss of some very fundamental freedoms as he feels he is no longer "free to come and go and enjoy the sun and the air" (MSR, p.86).

In relation to the health of the elderly inmates, scant attention is ever given to their dietary needs or wants. The meals consist of the following: bread and butter; lemon sago (burnt); dried pea and lentil casserole (burnt); and magotty soup. One is compelled when confronted with the details of the meals to respond similarly to Frankie when she states in her colloquial fashion "Anyways who the hell wants shithouse muck like this in the arvo!" (MSR, p.26). The cook is completely unsympathetic toward requests for anything which might constitute a pleasant and nutritionally improved change in diet. In fact she acts aggressively to any such requests,

"And as for baking apples, who do they think they are! This place ain't the Ritz. I'm not baking apples today for nobody. They can stuff them up their arseholes. Baked apples!" (MSR, p.29)

The picture is not relieved as the novel progresses. Much later in the novel the reader once again encounters the disagreeable cook shouting, "They can stuff themselves ... and bake their own fuckin' apples" (MSR, p.118).

Using a linear referencing of time Jolley evokes the world of The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude, a world which hastens the aging process, evacerbates the problems of old age and robs the elderly inmates of most of the pleasures of life in quite a systematic and terrible way. In changing so dramatically the circumstances and quality of the inmates' lives the social institution of the nursing hospital and the relatives of the elderly people combine with the natural forces of time in pushing the patients closer and closer to death.

Death is omnipresent in the novel for all the black comedy and farce. In the concluding pages of Kate Grenville's Lilian's Story the protagonist Lil Singer notes "The story of all
our lives is the story forward to death, although each of us might hope to be the exception. Our story forward to death is sequential. A progression forward to death. Such a progression belongs to the natural order of things and is along a route which inevitably all living things must tread. However it is also a progression which can be hurried along by the socially constructed and imposed circumstances of one’s life.

It is to this final loss, the loss of life, that the novel continually directs the reader’s attention. From the outset life at the hospital can be perceived in terms of a living death, what Miss Hailey refers to as “being buried in St Christopher and St Jude” (MSR, p.205). The inmates have been removed from the familiarity of family and home and incarcerated in a place for which they have no affinity and surrounded by people they simply do not know. These characters are caught, wanting to improve their present conditions and unable to do so. They are left to endure until death releases them from a situation which they can neither escape nor handle for themselves.

During Jolley’s exploration of the aging or dying process it becomes apparent that at least for some of the characters such a process involves the acceptance of death as being not only inevitable but also something not necessarily to be feared. Mr Scobie’s riddle, from which the novel takes its name, springs from his understanding of the common bondage of all human beings to the world of time and change and death. One learns that “Mr Scobie, looking up from his round basket chair, could not refrain from smiling. He smiled from one ear to the other and his lightly veined cheeks bulged” (MSR, p.120). His evident pleasure in posing his riddle is in sharp contrast to Matron Price’s anxious and repressive response. There is a steady and implacable wisdom articulated in the linear progression of the novel and revealed in the way Mr Scobie accepts the truth of his own mortality which makes all the more pathetic and futile Matron Price’s attempts to deny or ignore the most fundamental condition of her own existence. This wisdom finds its imaginative and affirming counterpart in the circular impulses of the novel.
Complementing the linear impulse in the narrative which traces the individual's progression through life and towards death is a looping narrative mode which explores each character's past and present lives and inner experiences up to and even seemingly beyond the point of death. The effect of Jolley's looping narrative style in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* is three-fold. The slow, circular unfolding of the characters' lives evokes the past to illuminate the genesis of the situation which exists in the present, discovers the characters constantly seeking refuge in the past in order to find some respite from the chaotic world of the nursing hospital and spirals as a counter-movement in the novel away from death and towards the possibility of renewal.

In terms of the temporal duality apparent in her writing Jolley has much in common with the poet Kenneth Slessor with whom she has already been compared in this chapter. In his poem "Captain Dobbin" Slessor evokes a harbour scene which is cruel and death-like, with the "blind tide" which "Pushed its drowned shoulders against the wheel", the "white, dead bodies ... anchored there/In marshes of spent light" and the stokers that "groaned and sweated with burnt skins."11 Co-existing with this world of death and destruction however is the private world of Captain Dobbin. In his room overlooking the harbour he relives the strange and exotic experiences of his seafaring days and remembres his shipmates, "Companions of no cruise by reading-glass,/But fellows of storm and honey from the past."12

In the final lines of the poem one finds the succinct expression of a temporal awareness akin to that to be found in Jolley's fiction. Within these lines the association of the aging Captain Dobbin with death is evident. He is "in his room,/In his little cemetery .../With fond memorial stones."13 However in these very same lines in phrases such as "sweet essences" and "lines of grace" there are suggestions that while death is inevitable something will live on, that Captain Dobbin's memories will remain intact and inviolate. In *Mr Scobie's Riddle* there is a corresponding sense of the imaginative and
potentially transcending possibilities of an individual’s inner life both up to and then beyond the point of death. It is the circularity of Jolley’s writing which enables her to explore so inclusively the subjective worlds of her characters, the “essences of life carried with them into the enforced limbo of the hospital”14 and their individual responses to both life and death.

In Jolley’s writing there is a cyclic pattern distinguished by the interplay of memory and imagination. Sparked by sights, smells and sounds the narrative loops backwards into moments of reverie and recollection. The circularity draws the reader very close to individual characters as one comes to know and think of them not just in terms of their participation in the present but also as they imagine themselves in their private worlds, in their past lives. The looping narrative is most effective in showing that for characters such as David Hughes, Fred Privett, Martin Scobie and Heather Hailey the past, that which is often obscure and remote, is actually not remote but deeply and at times painfully familiar.

For David Hughes just the sound of the magpies (MSR, p.32) is enough to evoke a past which he spends a considerable amount of time listening to. The “little excited whispering voices” (MSR, p.34) that fill his inner world are associated with his former active life of work and love, with the bricks he used to cart and with his wife and his sister-in-law. Fred Privett’s memories of the past centre on what used to be home for him - a modest house and a shed for his duck and his meatbird - all of which has been destroyed in order to make way for eight new townhouses. The narrative is peppered with his peculiar ditties sung “to the memory of the vanished Hep Duck and Hildegard the Meat” (MSR, p.106). In the nursing hospital Martin Scobie dreams of the hill behind his house, a hill he has yet to climb. The cherishing of this memory is evident in the almost magical richness and strangeness of the subjective world he creates under the obsessive emotional pressure of memory, nostalgia and desire.
In *Mr Scobie's Riddle* the reader is faced with the knowledge that these inmates do have or at least did have a family and home elsewhere and a very real sense of personal worth, all of which no longer exist for them in the present. In using a dual referencing of time Jolley is able to establish the patients' estrangement from the outside world and the wretchedness of their present lives and counterpoint this with subjective moments of stillness which the inmates experience as they seek refuge in the past and in moments removed from the turbulence of the institution. The imaginative representation of ways of finding personal tranquility in the midst of chaos and corruption is something which may well linger in the memory long after the reader has completed the novel *Mr Scobie's Riddle*. The writing has the potential to powerfully draw the reader to feelings of compassion for these characters, their public and private lives, their predicaments and their fates. This novel of Jolley's has much in common, including a complex referencing of time, with Patrick White's novel *Memoirs of Many in One*. A comparison of the two works reveals how the circularity in Jolley's narrative has the potential to work upon the reader's sensibility at a far more profound level than that of White's novel.

As authors both White and Jolley are interested in the creative person, share a sympathy for eccentricity and the plights of the misfits of society and have a similar comic gift and imaginative apprehension of time. The protagonist of *Memoirs of Many in One* Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray in many ways resembles the characters peopling *Mr Scobie's Riddle*. Alex is old and in the final stages of the novel is committed to an institution by her daughter Hilda with whom Alex has been living. In terms of possibilities for actual experience the elderly Alex's life is quite limited but in the creation of this character, as in the creation of the characters in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* but to a far greater degree, there is a sense of immense possibilities for imagination and inner life.

However notwithstanding these similarities the evocation and interweaving of external reality with subjective inner worlds in *Memoirs of Many in One* is such that it does not
stir the heart or the conscience of at least this reader as it does in Jolley’s *Mr Scobie’s Riddle*. In her memoirs when recalling a conversation between herself and her son Hal Alex refers to “the womb of my imagination.” The imagery she applies to herself is apt. From this most fertile “womb” Alex gives birth to an incredible variety of identities and in so doing reveals her predilection for the unusual, the colourful, the exotic, the outrageous. During the course of the novel this protean character imagines herself in a range of roles and circumstances: as the Empress Alexandra of Byzantium and Nicaea creating pandemonium at an elaborate society luncheon party; as Cassiani the “impostor-nun” living with her lover the monk Onouphrious on the island of Nisos; as her mother-in-law Magda Demirjian indulging in some fellatio with Colonel Cyril Ogden Bloodworth in a taxi. This quite short list of course could be extended as Alex’s active imagination provides her, the “seasoned performer”, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of roles to play.

The word “play” is used here quite deliberately for the assuming of a fluctuating variety of identities for Alex while being a performance is also generally a game. There is never any any real sense of Alex experiencing the kind of travail one would normally associate with a birth - albeit in this instance of the mind rather than of the body. As Axel Clark notes in his review of this novel the identities Alex brings to life “emerge from her spontaneously, without any evident labour to construct them or conscious effort to invent them.” At times Alex scarcely allows herself the opportunity to draw breath in between creating as she brings one self to life, revels in the role then discards it in order to take on the new and emerging role with considerable alacrity.

As a character Alex is often comical and it is possible to respond to her vitality and creativity. It is also possible to remain quite detached, to relax and enjoy the performance or performances as one might enjoy any similarly kaleidoscopic display without ever feeling compelled to become in any way involved, to really care, about the character Alex Gray.
In contrast the convenient and multifarious acts of metamorphosis Alex experiences are simply not available to the characters in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* where a far steadier and more closely interwoven interplay of public and private worlds is sustained in the writing. It is true that the protagonists in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* do escape from the tedium of the present into subjective worlds of their own making. These worlds however, fashioned through a blending of memory and imagination, are quite immutable and do not undergo significant changes of substance or form as the novel develops. This means that for these characters as well as escaping into the past it is also a past from which they cannot escape. Experiencing this, for the characters, can be quite distressing.

In Martin Scobie's mind are stored memories which are both painful and guilt-ridden. His classical music is meant, in his mind, to call forth preserved "images of rapture" stored "somewhere inside him for those times ahead when he would need to be comforted" (*MSR*, p.98). However his music (see *MSR* pp. 23 and 95) and the sight of young children (see *MSR*, p. 46) finally succeed only in conjuring up the disturbing memory of being caught in a compromising position with his young, female piano student Lina. Returning to the past as it is evoked by his classical music involves for Martin Scobie the dredging up of aspects of his former life of which he is ashamed and which sadden him.

Heather Hailey, like Alex, is a character of great personal vitality and creativity. In her one recognises corresponding traits of comic resilience and resistance and a certain mental toughness too. Yet Heather Hailey is haunted by an indiscretion in her past and as a result remains in hiding at The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude, frightened of the outside world, penniless and disgraced. For Martin Scobie and Heather Hailey it is often the case as it is for Rick in *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* that "memories are a bloody nuisance." 21

Jolley's writing has the potential to stir the feelings of her readers in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* as she touches on so many levels of human experience, providing visions of suffering and
experience, exploring the conflicts of life, the day-to-day struggles of human existence, the pleasures and pain of human subjectivity using the looping narrative mode. As well as drawing the reader close to individual characters during their journey through life the circularity in the writing also directs the ways in which the deaths of the various inmates of The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude are perceived through the careful accretion of most suggestive images as they respond to the reality of death in their own highly individual ways.

Early in the novel Mr Privett remembers "the flash of green when the sun dropped into the sea at sunset" (MSR, p.28). He also remembers the Norfolk Island pine tree bridging the "middle distance between the earth and the sky" (MSR, p.28). Much further in the narrative as Fred Privett is being carried along the road to the harbour one learns that

A few people, keeping their eyes on the bright ball of the sun, were able to see the miraculous flash of green explode into the sky and the sea at the moment of sunset (MSR, p.108).

This is an epiphanic moment in the novel, the words "miraculous" and "explode" and "flash" building upon the earlier scene and suggesting a vibrant return to life. The words and images used combine to produce an atmosphere of ecstatic unity. It is an apocalyptic moment in which sea and sky, life and death, are held in a single vision.

As the narrative circles various motifs come to be associated with Fred Privett and clustering around him at the time of his death they point to the nature of his death as being both triumphant and celebratory. In bridging the gap between sky and earth the Norfolk Island pine tree is linked with transfiguration and unity. As Miss Hailey dances "a dance of the majesty of the pines and of their transfiguration" (MSR, p.211) in the concluding pages of the novel the reader is reminded of the old man who used to watch the transfiguration of a similar pine tree and of the celebratory and transcendent
nature of his death. Whereas the character Fred in David Ireland's *The Flesheaters* dies "to the sound of the music he hated" and with his eyes full of hate Fred Privett leaves the nursing hospital with dignity and tranquility to the tune of his own distinctive brand of music.

The circularity in the writing similarly directs the way in which Martin Scobie's death is perceived. At one stage in the novel Mr Scobie writes to his nephew Hartley of his attempted and thwarted escape from the nursing hospital "My Joy at going East towards my home, towards my Youth, so to speak, carried me forward and I did not feel in the least tired" (*MSR*, p.124).

His home one recalls is appropriately called "Rosewood East" and just prior to his death he tries to return home once more. At that point he is paradoxically heading East towards his youth and yet inevitably West towards his death. (Constance Rooke discusses this imagery in her essay "Mr Scobie's Riddle and the Contemporary Vollendungsroman." *MSR*, p.137).

Death and life are presented as being two arcs comprising part of the one circle, part of the "changes which occur naturally from the cycle of growth and death, decomposition and regrowth" (*MSR*, p.137).

The symbolism used in relation to Mr Scobie's death and the style of presenting it are reminiscent of those used by the poet John Donne in "Hymne to God My God, In My Sickness." Donne writes

> What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
> In all flatt maps (and I am one) are one,
> So death doth touch the Resurrection. 24

In this poem, as in the description of Mr Scobie's death, one witnesses the bringing together and fusing of apparent opposites in a kind of spiralling circularity. Used to similar effect is the "perverse sunset" in Patrick White's novel *The Twyborn Affair*. In the final pages of this novel, concerned with the journey of the individual beyond the point of death,
this sunset is to the East rather than to the West. In *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* Martin Scobie’s life comes full circle so that at the time of his death he leaves behind the confusing and disturbing energies which have been dominating his life at the hospital for a place infinitely more tranquil and inviting.

The answer to Job quoted by Mr Scobie just before his death signals his moving on to a deeper and transcendent but at the same time anticipated realm of experience,

If I take the wings of the morning,
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me (*MSR*, p.194).

The imagery of sea and sky links Mr Scobie’s death with Mr Privett’s death. Through the looping narrative, the recurring images and memories, the writing provides a sense of these men’s deaths as being both hopeful and affirmative. In *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* there is a very real sense, as first Mr Privett and then Mr Scobie dies, that these men know where they are going, for they leave along paths that they have travelled at least in part before. The realm of experience they move into at the point of death is familiar whilst of course containing something of the unknown.

The nature of Jolley’s exploration of human experience and behaviour is complex and wide-ranging as, using a dual referencing of time, she ventures into differing worlds in her writing. Some of these worlds are timebound whilst others are curiously removed from the influences of time. In her use of such alternating time frames Jolley has much in common with other distinguished Australian writers. In Patrick White’s novel *The Tree of Man* the protagonist Stan finds that the “nostalgia of permanence and the fiend of motion” 26 fight within him. Similarly Rob Coram in Randolph Stow’s *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* realises “Time was irredeemable” 27 yet also has a strong sense of his world as being one which would “revolve and nothing would ever change.” 28 There is a corresponding dual perspective and conflict apparent in the
lives of the elderly inmates in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* as after lingering in their timeless and subjective worlds they are repeatedly dragged back to the present and confronted with the grim reality of their present circumstances.

Through their imaginative apprehension of time these authors are able to begin considering some of the most fundamental conundrums of human existence. For Rob Coram “time ... was more mysterious than he had guessed. Time confused him and possessed his mind, like a riddle, which might have the answer to every riddle.” In *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* the young Rob as he matures tends to move away from the poetic imaginings of his childhood and from the vivid and happy memories of that time. However the suggestion is there in the text, even though it appears to be overwhelmed by the linear progression of the novel, that Rob will return at some time to the imaginative world of the past. The answer to Rob's riddle, it can be argued, may well be inextricably bound up with the wisdom acquired during a life-time's experience and the continuation of a process which has begun in childhood, but this time from a distance. The final lines of John Donne's poem “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” which read “thine firmness makes my circle just and makes me end where I begun” feature in the novel and permit speculative reading beyond the end of the novel itself. There is the suggestion of the possibility of Rob Coram coming full circle during the course of his life and returning to his riddle in his old age with increased understanding of the co-existence of change and stasis in each individual's life.

Jolley's *Mr Scobie's Riddle* also considers the riddle of time but not from a child’s perspective. In this novel the riddle is considered from the perspective of those elderly individuals and close to death. The riddle Mr Scobie poses for Matron Price is “What is it we all know is going to happen but we don’t know when or how?” (*MSR*, p.120). Death as the answer to the riddle is deceptively simple. Behind the one-word answer in the complex interweaving of the linear and circular impulses in the novel lie a diverse array of possibilities relating to ways of perceiving and responding to
both life and death.

Using her dual referencing of time Jolley is able to imaginatively realise her characters’ experiences of both life and death and their perceptions of and responses to some of the most fundamental conditions and conundrums of human existence. In so doing she characteristically does not provide her reader with neat solutions to the human dilemmas her writing presents. Just as one begins to relax during the concluding pages of *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* thinking that characters such as David Hughes, Fred Privett and Martin Scobie have finally found in death the peace they so desperately craved the novel comes full circle to end where it began. Much of Jolley’s writing operates in this way with the technique being used in such novels as *The Well, Foxybaby* and *Cabin Fever* and in short stories such as “Two Men Running” (*WL*, pp.47-70) and *Paper Children* (*WL*, pp. 82-100).

The ending of *Mr Scobie’s Riddle* far from evading or softening the realities of the situation sharpens one’s sense of them. The novel concludes as it began, with a Night Sister’s report dated November 1. In the report the reader is confronted with the knowledge of three new yet all too familiar admissions being made to The Hospital of St Christopher and St Jude and the continuation of the corrupt institution. As Jolley states in an interview with Candida Baker “The place will just go on.”

In the final pages of the novel one’s attention is directed back to the beginning of the work. The writing brings to life on the printed page an array of human experiences and points to the need to look again, to continue searching both within the text and of course beyond it for one’s own answers to the conundrums of human existence. Therein lies the force of Jolley’s imaginative dual referencing of time as at its very best it refuses to leave the reader alone and continues to haunt, to challenge and disturb, long after the final pages have been read.
NOTES


7. Slessor, "Five Bells."


11. Slessor, "Captain Dobbin."

12. Slessor, "Captain Dobbin."

13. Slessor, "Captain Dobbin."


31. Although the answer to the riddle is not directly stated in the novel itself Jolley confirms that death is the answer in an interview with Candida Baker, *Yacker: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*. (Sydney: Pan Books, 1986), p. 22.

Chapter 5. Spirals of Understanding in *Cabin Fever*

A particular way of thinking about the whole notion of exploration as being a kind of spiralling perceptual endeavour informs and is a characteristic quality of Elizabeth Jolley's writing. So many of her novels, notably *The Well, Mr Scobie's Riddle, Foxybaby, Miss Peabody's Inheritance, My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever*, in their final pages circle back to where they began. In "Little Gidding" T. S. Eliot writes

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.\(^1\)

A similar circular and also spiralling emphasis is evident in Elizabeth Jolley's work. The very manner in which her stories are constructed directs the reader's attention back to the beginning of each work. Jolley's characters are often imagined reflecting upon their own lives, both past and present. In the construction of her stories the opportunity is created for the reader also to pause and reflect, to look again and to look more closely, to see more and to see more clearly.

In her discussion of the writer-character Miss Hailey of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* Sue Gillett could well be writing of the author Elizabeth Jolley when she states

Her writerly preoccupations express both the frustration at the lack of finality or resolution inherent in living, and the excitement of possibilities entailed in concreation, in rewriting, in renewal, in the opening, not closing, of exploration. \(^2\)

Indeed Delys Bird makes a similar observation in relation to Jolley herself when she writes that in Jolley's fiction "there is always a further prospect, a promise of the continuation of
the pleasure of the journey, if not its resolution." 3 In the concluding pages of so many of the works within the Jolley oeuvre there is a strong sense that for the characters the searching or questing is not yet over, the exploration is not and indeed may never be complete. Cabin Fever is such a novel. This most recently published of Jolley’s books is a highly crafted and powerful, ultimately hopeful work. It is one with which the reader has to really engage intellectually and imaginatively, effecting a kind of sifting and sorting process which continues well into any re-readings in order to come to understand and appreciate the nature of the central character’s quest and her particular integrity and worth.

For Jolley’s characters the quest for personal maturity, for a sense of identity is a slow, self-reflexive process. Characters are observed not only being but also becoming during the course of their lives. Late in the novel Miss Peabody’s Inheritance Diana writes to Miss Peabody and tells her “it interests me very much that people can and do change their level of expectation” (MPI, pp.148-9). Clearly in this novel Dorothyy is a self evolving, changing, extending the boundaries of her small, circumscribed world and discovering more about herself in the process. In Jolley’s fiction moments of self-discovery often necessitate the character in some way being removed from the self and given the opportunity to self-scrutinise. In the imagery in the novels My Father’s Moon and Foxybaby there is a sense of the self which is detached and able to be observed. In a short passage entitled “The Hunt” which considers the possibilities for personal “tranquility” and “enlightenment” the protagonist Vera of My Father’s Moon remembers

Once I saw a hand in the leaves. It seemed to be reaching towards me, it was my own hand. I often hold out my hand now towards the bushes in order to see this enticing reflection (MFM, p.83).

Similarly in Foxybaby the central character reflects upon moments in life where one in a sense meets one’s self,

There are times, Miss Porch thought, in life when
one might be walking towards oneself. Either the child towards the adult or the other way round (FB, p.246).

While Jolley's exploration of the evolving self and of the ongoing and quite involved self-reflexive process is a feature of many of her works it receives its most extended and complete expression in the novel Cabin Fever.

The novel Cabin Fever is a companion-piece to the earlier work My Father's Moon and both are narrated by the central character Vera, although at differing stages in her life. In Cabin Fever Vera embarks upon an exploration of self in which the external world recedes as she undertakes to examine the life or lives of her soul. From the outset the direction the exploration will take is quite clearly and imaginatively signposted. This is to be a journey of exploration and discovery into the depths of her own soul, a journey which may well afford her a deepening perspective on her own life as well as on the lives of other people in society.

The epigraph by William Penn indicates both the direction the exploration will take and the spirit with which it will be entered into as it explains "Nowhere either with more quiet or more freedom from trouble does a man retire than into his own soul" (CF, epigraph). This quotation foreshadows the inward-looking nature of Vera's quest for self-discovery. In her hotel room Vera is completely isolated as she deliberately enters and explores the depths of her own being. Such a process holds the possibility if not the promise of her experiencing for herself the illumination and understanding which can come to the questing individual when totally alone.

As well as the Penn epigraph creating in one's mind the expectation that this novel will focus upon a character retiring "into the depths of (her) own soul" it also provides an indication of the spirit of calm reflection which characterises much of her exploration of her innermost self. Acknowledging this is crucial to any informed understanding of the text and yet it has been a point of confusion in the mind of at least one reviewer. Helen Elliott when reviewing Cabin Fever refers to
"the sheer tediousness of a journey through self-pity by an infernally self-regarding young narrator."\(^4\) Elliott's comments here are based upon her misreading and subsequent misrepresentation of the text and specifically of the nature of the exploration and the value of the discoveries made in the process. The naive, perplexed and tearful Vera encountered in *My Father's Moon* and in the retrospective sections of the later novel should not be confused with the older, more sagacious Vera of the present in *Cabin Fever*.

The novel *Cabin Fever* is constructed in such a way that it is often left to the reader to piece together the fragments of Vera's life and to ascertain the nature and the value of this protagonist's exploration of self. Such things may be intimated in the text but ultimately it is the reader's task to adopt an active role in the reading process in order to unravel the complexities and recognise the very real optimism inherent in this carefully structured and highly crafted work. In her article Helen Elliott pays scant attention to the temporal and completely ignores the moral distance which exists in *Cabin Fever* between the youthful Vera of the old school trunk and coat and the Vera sitting and reflecting in her hotel room. It is the older Vera who is able to take advantage of what Peter Walsh in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* terms the "compensation of growing old" which is

\[
\text{that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one has gained - at last - the power which adds the supreme flavour to existence - the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly in the light.} \quad \text{5}
\]

Any inclusive understanding of this novel does involve the reader, intellectually and imaginatively, in a sifting and sorting process. If one is prepared to do this then some very significant differences emerge.

As one follows Vera on an examination and often a re-examination of the varying stages of her life it becomes apparent that this is a woman exploring her past thoughts, feelings and actions with an ever-increasing self-knowledge,
with a clarity of understanding borne of the many discoveries she makes whilst mentally revisiting the experiences of the past. On the very first page of the first chapter the character Magda explains to a youthful Vera

that's where character and experience are, in the lines and the frowns and the wrinkles. Your sweet face is deliciously soft and smooth at present, you must try and preserve it for ever. But even you will have experience one day and you must expect it to alter your appearance (CF, p.1, author's emphasis).

Her experiences of course do not only alter Vera's appearance but also dramatically affect the course of her life both personally and professionally. In addition to this they also provide her in retrospect with almost unlimited opportunities to develop and deepen her perceptions of herself and of society. However they only do so because of her preparedness to conduct not a self-pitying jouney of exploration as Helen Elliott suggests 6 but rather a far more "ruthless self-examination" (CF, p.7). It is in this way that she is gradually able to develop a perspective and essentially a moral perspective on her own life.

Whilst in her hotel room Vera examines retrospectively the experiences she has had during her life as a boarding-school girl, student nurse and then as an au pair. It is not always or even necessarily a pleasant journey into the past for her as the exploration unearths much anxiety and sorrow and often a painful and latent sense of shame. Vera's examination of her surfacing memories reveals her in her youth as initially lacking any clearly defined sense of personal morality. However as the examination deepens it also reveals a young woman in the process of "becoming." It is while she is at the Hilda Street Wentworth lying-in hospital that a process of "essential change" (CF, p.8) begins in her life involving her simultaneously in an exploration of self and of society which eventually culminates in the extended exploration of her past experiences as she pauses for reflection in her hotel room.
As a young woman much of Vera's life revolves around her need to court the approval of particular individuals and her desire to model herself on others. At boarding-school she endeavours to copy Helen Ferguson's posture and facial expressions and Muriel's qualities of thought and perception (CF, p.14). Later she seeks to imitate various attributes she admires in several of the professional women with whom she comes into contact. She resolves "to emulate Sister Russel and Dr McCabe and what I remember of Ramsden" (CF, p.50). She is easily seduced by the wealthy and flashy Metcalfe couple and finds herself "for a long time taken up with Dr Metcalfe or Magda, or both of them" (CF, p.3). Trying to be like and to be liked by these people leaves Vera personally quite unenriched. This is a pattern which is to continue for some time in her life as she finds herself characteristically simply living on the edges of other people's lives.

Through her relations with the unscrupulous Dr Metcalfe Vera is blessed, like Tess in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* with "that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law." 7 She leaves the hospital and a promising nursing career and goes to work as an *au pair* looking after the children of two university lecturers. It is a depressing existence for her and one marked by drudgery and loneliness. In this milieu she experiences "a way of living which does not offer (her) anything except an unbearable emptiness" (CF, p.65). Nevertheless she remains "living in their house, being on the edge of the family" (CF, p.57) until the impending birth of her child makes it necessary for her to re-locate at the Hilda Street Wentworth lying-in hospital.

At the Hilda Street Wentworth hospital Vera is once again unhappily situated on the fringe of other people's lives, leading a life herself of emotional, financial, intellectual, social and sexual impoverishment. She rarely ventures beyond the grounds of the lying-in hospital and lives, as Trent informs her, "without clothes, without money and without friends" (CF, p.158). The exploration of Vera's past experiences up to this period in her life reveals her limited sense of self in terms of knowing and attempting to satisfy her own needs, passions, ambitions, what you will.
However what also becomes apparent as Vera's past is being examined is that while she is at the Hilda Street Wentworth hospital something happens which provides the impetus for her to take a risk and venture out into the world in order to discover a place where she can "fit" sexually, personally, morally. What happens also prompts her to embark upon another and inter-related voyage of exploration into the depths of her own soul in order to discover and perhaps know for the first time her evolving self.

The re-appearance of Vera's past colleague Trent in her life signals the beginning of Vera's attempt to gain some kind of moral perspective on a life which until this point in time has been characterised by an inability to see and appreciate anything but the hopelessness of her present situation. It is Trent, who once helped Vera with her belongings when she was leaving the nursing hospital (CF, p.46), who now points the way for Vera and encourages her to take risks, grasp opportunities which present themselves and search for what is proper for her self.

The idea of changes in her life being essential begins to take shape in Vera's mind shortly after Trent's arrival at the Hilda Street Wentworth hospital. In the present Vera reflects

It seems now as if the urchin style, the razor cut, has some remembered significance as does the slow walking in the long wet withered grass of autumn. It is as if both can be thought capable of bringing about essential change (CF, p.8).

It is Trent who suggests the urchin cut (CF, p.154) and who offers to Vera her perceptions and advice in relation to Vera's past experiences and present lifestyle.

Trent tells Vera quite bluntly

you must pick up your life after letting that rotten man and his wife ruin it, because ruin it they did. You must get back into what you are meant to do,
Wright, I mean this. I really do mean this, Wright (CF, pp.161-2).

Such a harsh appraisal forces Vera to consider for herself many of her past experiences and is the catalyst for her decision to leave the lying-in hospital. She reflects after Trent leaves her

Life, having come suddenly to a standstill because of a single remark which, cutting deep beneath the skin causing an unbelievable and unexpected hurt, has to go on with an equal change of pace, equal that is to the abruptness of the standstill. I who never once in my thoughts felt the need of harshness towards Dr Metcalfe and Magda, have now to soften for myself somehow the abrasive judgement with which I am left (CF, p.165).

Morally these realisations mark a crucial turning-point in Vera's life. She finally recognises and accepts the need for changes to be made in her life and changes of her own determining. She applies for and is successful in obtaining a post at the "progressive" boarding school Fairfields (CF, p.166). However before too long it becomes apparent to her that she has not yet discovered her niche and she decides to leave Fairfields. This is all part of the "essential change" (CF, p.8) to which she refers.

The experience of walking slowly in "the long wet withered grass of autumn" (CF, p. 8 and p. 173) belongs to her time spent at Fairfields and specifically to the time she spends in the company of her father when he visits her at the boarding-school. His arrival helps her to understand "that Fairfields is unbearable" (CF, p.173) and that it really only holds for both herself and her daughter the promise of a "dreary future" (CF, p.187) akin to that of another staff member Olive Morris and her four children. Vera comes to understand, just as Andrea does in Palomino, that if she is to know any degree of personal fulfilment she must set out yet again and continue her search elsewhere in the hope of discovering for herself new and personally more satisfying
ways of living.

As well as venturing out into the world Vera also begins an exploration of her inner self and of her past experiences following Trent's visit. This is an exploration which is to continue throughout the rest of her life, perhaps reaching its apogee in her New York hotel room. Such an on-going exploration or self-examination alters the protagonist's perspective on life as she returns to past experiences with an ever-increasing degree of self-knowledge and insight, augmenting her capacity for compassion, empathy and love.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes apparent that Vera's perceptions of herself, of other individuals and of past experiences alter over time. These perceptual changes can be largely attributed to her developing willingness to discover and explore the darker side of her soul, to attempt to understand and learn from her own failures and the failures, the humanness, of the people from the past. Her reflections upon the experiences she has had with such people as Betsy Drinkwater, Gertrude and Dr Metcalfe point to the very real progress Vera has made in her quest for insight and understanding.

Recollecting the offhand and frequently nasty ways in which she has treated gentle people such as Betsy Drinkwater and Gertrude who genuinely cared about her and sought to help her invokes in Vera a sense of shame and humility. In the hotel room she muses "I am a shabby person. I understand, if I look back, that I have treated kind people with an unforgiveable shabbiness "(CF, p.7). When looking at a photograph taken during an afternoon and evening spent at the Drinkwater's farm when she was a schoolgirl a "curious sense of shame comes over (her)" (CF, p.13). In the process of recollecting the visit she realises

It is my pretended affection which makes me ashamed now ... the remembered boarding school cruelty inflicted on the innocent victim. It is too the remembered tea table, the empty plates with jam smeared knives and the tea cups spilled into
their saucers which we left that day for Mrs Drinkwater and Betsy to come back to when they were done with the milking and when the hens had been shut up for the night (CF, p.13).

With the advantages of hindsight she perceives with some remorse her own spitefulness, selfishness and falsity in her relations with other people.

The rustic Gertrude incubating chickens and offering to Vera her plucked fowls, eggs and observations on life has a wisdom that is all her own and is yet another person Vera treats with a distinct lack of care or consideration. It is only later on that Vera, in returning to and re-reading Gertrude's letters, fully appreciates all Gertrude's "wisdom and her kindness, her persuasion and her love" (CF, p.190). Vera's understanding of past experiences and relationships and her participation in them becomes increasingly lucid when she pauses to explore them retrospectively and introspectively.

Her understanding of her own actions and of human nature in general deepens as she reflects upon and discovers more about her past. An observation she makes which is related to the definition she provides of the condition known as Cabin Fever in the novel (see CF, p.52) points to the progress she has made in her quest for insight and understanding. It is also related in part to her developing perceptions of her relationship with Jonathon Metcalfe. She muses

Perhaps if I had known more about thin ice, about the metaphor of the strength of the beavers' tails, more about what is hidden immediately beneath the skin, hidden behind the voice of excited enthusiasm or the melting gaze which seems to be, at the time, love - I could have known earlier about things which cannot be known purely from the surface, from the outside appearance (CF, p.53).

What is perhaps most important is that she has reached the point where she does understand that it is not possible to simply accept everything at face value in relation both to
herself and to other people for in exploring it is always possible to discover more, to see more clearly and to understand more completely.

Vera examining her relationship with Dr Metcalfe changes her perspective on him. Remembering an interlude she spends with him in the country Vera reflects

His reasoning, I thought then, is so much the truth and he is right about the reality of what we must do. I believed in him, then, completely (CF, p.122).

The repetition of the word “then” emphasizes the moral distance between the Vera actually involved in the relationship and the Vera some years later reflecting upon the experience. It is clear that although at one stage in her life Vera was willing to accept Jonathon Metcalfe’s opinions as unassailable truths she is no longer prepared to do so. She now seeks to discover and to know for herself.

Interwoven into the text itself is a strong sense of Vera’s expanding consciousness. Each time Vera pauses for reflection and returns to the depths of her soul she is able to understand a little more completely, to see things more clearly. In the present Vera has come to New York to attend and to deliver a paper for some kind of medical conference at which

All aspects of human life are being examined and a wide range of specialists are to be present; psychiatrists, physicians, surgeons, pharmacists, general practitioners, nurses and social workers (CF, p.92).

While Vera’s most recent and extended exploration of her past experiences provides herself and the reader with an ever-developing perspective on much of her life it also provides the protagonist, one suspects, with the basis from which to compose the paper she is scheduled to deliver at the conference.
The essence of Vera's voyage of self-discovery is encapsulated in the Saint Augustine quotation placed at the beginning of the last chapter of *Cabin Fever*. It reads

All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory. In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons, together with everything I have ever perceived in them by my senses ... In it I meet myself as well as I remember myself (*CF*, p.235).

The time Vera spends exploring the past is as much part of the preparation for the paper she is to give as the notes she actually sits and makes. Both are gathered and made "ready at (her) summons" for both are required in order for her to present her paper. Early in the novel Vera remarks

For my work a ruthless self-examination is needed for, without understanding something of myself, how can I understand anyone else (*CF*, p.7).

It follows then that Vera may well consider it impossible to deliver a paper entitled "Perspectives on Moral Insanity" without first gaining a moral perspective upon her own life and recognising within it her many actions and responses which, when carefully and retrospectively scrutinised, do contain elements of moral insanity.

The nature of Vera's ongoing exploration of the past is such that she is continually discovering more about herself and in the process developing her own sense of personal morality. In works such as Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story* and Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Aunt's Story* one encounters central characters involved in personal odysseys very similar in nature to that of Vera's journey of discovery. For each of the protagonists in the novels mentioned such a quest yields significant gains which can be measured in terms of acquired wisdom and understanding not only in relation to the self but also to society at large.

In the final pages of the novel *Lilian's Story* the
protagonist Lil Singer describes the process of self-realisation she has undertaken during her life. She states

I fill myself now, and look with pity on those hollow men in their suits, those hollow women in their classic navy and white. They have not made themselves up from their presents and their pasts, but have let others do it for them, while I, large and plain, frightening to them and sometimes to myself, have taken the past and the present into myself.  

Lil recognises that the process of becoming involves an understanding and acceptance of one's past experiences and a melding of these with one's present. She also points to the dualities inherent in the quest when she states exultantly “I fill myself now” and then indicates a little further on that such a process can indeed be “frightening” at times. Lil is something of a crucible filled with a myriad of life experiences. Using them she constructs for herself her own sense of personal identity, reaching a point where she has considerable insights into herself and into those around her too.

This is an achievement to which Vera in Cabin Fever can similarly lay claim and which, whilst being of immense personal value, is also of considerable worth at a social level. Jolley explains in an interview with Phillipa Hawker

I feel optimistic about Vera. In the second book I wanted to show her as a person who is confronted daily with people experiencing what she experienced earlier in life, but she has managed to overcome it, to become someone who can give something back to other people.

In this way Vera resembles Eadith Trist in Part Three of The Twyborn Affair. While in The Twyborn Affair one is made very aware of Eadith Trist's sense of “her own failures, her anxiety, her disproportion” it is nevertheless impossible to overlook her very considerable achievements. Although she does
experience moments of great longing and loneliness it is clear that she is able to place herself within the larger framework of things. Establishing herself as the bawd of Beckwith Street she draws from this existence a compassionate and humane response when dealing with the people she encounters. She is adept at penetrating their minds and is able to enter their lives as comforter, confessor and confidante. They for their part have confidence in Eadith and many of the people around her depend upon her for purpose, vitality and personal development. She is an extremely humble and sympathetic character constantly reaching out to others and helping them. She becomes “an institution, a cult, even with many who considered themselves far above anything like that.”

Through increasing her self-knowledge and understanding Vera too is able to sympathise with and assist the people with whom she comes into contact. Professionally Vera in the present works in a consultative capacity. She explains

Every day I am seeing people living from day to day... from one despairing week to the next, without any vision of any kind of future. It does not take me long to understand this because during my own small celebrations of passing moments I have seen the world and my own life, at a particular time in that life, from one narrowed day to the next, from cramped week to cramped week, at ground and hedge-root level, unable to see anything beyond the immediate (CF, p.7).

Her past experiences are something inside her to which Vera frequently returns in order to explore and discover more about herself. In so doing she also has much to offer those individuals who come to her seeking help.

In the present in the novel Cabin Fever the narrative is framed by the image of Vera sitting in a room on the twenty-fourth floor of a New York hotel. In this context she calls to mind yet another female literary figure, Theodora Goodman of The Aunt's Story. In The Aunt's Story Theodora is on a quest of discovery which leads her, in the manner of Vera, into “that
solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard."12 Black one remembers is the colour of the hat and the big gauze rose by Theodora Goodman as she, like Vera, visits America in the final section of the novel.13 Vera's own clothing sets her apart, distinguishing her as being different from the colourful holiday-makers milling around her at the airport. She reflects "Perhaps my black clothes are partly the cause of uneasiness" (CF, p.16) and feels that "My black briefcase and black clothes are out of place" (CF, p.17). Both Theo and Vera are survivors in life and have come through like a phoenix, fittingly blackened and with immense possibilities for inner knowledge and experience.

Like Theodora on the mountain Vera high up in her hotel room has also survived the vicissitudes of time. Along the way Vera has accumulated what her father might refer to as a "storehouse of experience" (CF, p.236). It is this inner storehouse which Vera unlocks in the solitude of her hotel room, imaginatively enters into and explores. Late in the novel Vera reflects upon the necessity of collecting "all the images and experiences as if they were treasures in a small storehouse" (CF, pp.236-7). The metaphor is particularly apt for these past experiences enrich the owner, offering Vera a wealth of possibilities for inner knowledge, ultimate understanding and wisdom and enabling her in turn to reach out and help other people.

What remains in this reader's mind after having read, and re-read as the complexity and construction of the text itself seems to necessitate, Cabin Fever is the powerful and convincing image of a human being who in the manner of Lil Singer, Eadith Trist and Theodora Goodman has struggled to find tranquility and objectivity in the midst of the many worrying and conflicting forces that have dominated her life. Ultimately Vera manages to carve out for herself a positive and humane existence and to find some measure of peace in, and exercise some control over, her own life. The considerable gains she has made along the way - which can be regarded in terms of her inner strength, maturity, accumulated wisdom and compassion - are directly related to her willingness to commit herself to developing and deepening her perceptions of her own
life, of her experiences of loneliness and despair and of moments that have seemed to offer a way out. For the reader returning to *Cabin Fever* holds the possibility if not the promise of similarly discovering more, of gaining further insights and understandings too in relation to human thoughts, feelings and actions. It is in this way that Jolley's exploration of the individual's quest towards self-realisation offers her readers the opportunity to cleanse the doors of their own perception to use William Blake's phrase.14
NOTES

1. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding."


6. Helen Elliott, "Little That's Jolley in this Poverty of Spirit."


Chapter 6. Creating Space for Imagining with Reference to *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*

Elizabeth Jolley's fiction offers the reader many opportunities of access to the multifarious world of imagining. In her writing there is a tendency towards obliquity and omission and much in the way of details and understanding is simply left to the reader to imaginatively provide. While this may at times seem a little off-putting the effect is really not to diminish one's interest but rather to engage and intensify it as the reader becomes an active participant in the creative process. In *Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays* Delys Bird explains:

> To enter the landscape of Elizabeth Jolley's fiction is to move, like Alice, into a strange territory, a wonderland. Within it, the reader has to discover the logic of its topography in its own terms.¹

One of the most challenging aspects for the individual encountering such a "landscape" is the space which so often has to be imaginatively traversed with very little, if any, authorial assistance as Jolley creates space for imagining and offers it largely uncharted to her reader.

In crafting her work Jolley sets about the task of creating imaginative spaces for the reader to fill. Speaking in Perth at an annual psychiatrists' conference she states "To be aware of someone else's feeling or thought at a particular moment creates the possibility of the imagination supplying the rest."² Such a perspective clearly informs her writing where she achieves a maximum of suggestiveness with a minimum of detail, using various narrative strategies which work to involve the reader in the creative process.

In the construction of her stories Elizabeth Jolley
employs a conversational mode which makes use of ellipses, providing her reader with the opportunity to mentally fill the gap which is left. Her stories are often episodic in structure, at times switching mid-sentence and only offering the reader fragments of events and experiences. The task of piecing together these fragments into some kind of whole is characteristically left to the reader to perform. Also Jolley does not always clarify in her writing what her characters are actually experiencing at any given point in time. Rather into her texts are woven differing shades of meaning to which the reader needs to be attuned as Jolley intimates and then leaves it to the reader to draw out the implications. The endings to so many of her stories too tend far more towards the obscure and the inconclusive than they do towards any attempt at resolution. In considering a range of Jolley's works in which such features are not simply evident but are integral to the texts it is possible to appreciate how Jolley challenges and involves her readers, drawing on their inner resources as she takes them into the world of imagining.

Jolley's use of ellipses in the conversational mode works at quite a subtle level. The omissions in her writing offer the reader the opportunity to step into the shoes as it were of particular characters and to see the world from their perspective. Such a technique often involves the reader in the imagining of experiences quite removed from conventional ways of feeling and behaving.

In the novel Miss Peabody's Inheritance Jolley's use of the conversational mode creates blanks on the page for the reader to imaginatively fill. When Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon find themselves in a motel room and able to take advantage of some time alone together Miss Thorne's half-uttered suggestion is a provocative one,

"Edgely's got for a walk," she says stripping off her nightdress, "so why don't we ..." (MPI, p.10).

Given the likelihood that these two post-menopausal women are about to engage in some activity of a sexual nature the reader is placed in the position of being able to imaginatively
and perhaps instinctively complete Miss Thorne’s sentence for her.

How the sentence is completed, how the scene is imagined in each reader’s mind will of course vary. When reviewing the novel Foxybaby Marion Halligan makes the point that in this author’s fiction “Strange things happen in bathrooms - Jolley is fond of kinky ablutions.” A familiarity with other “bathroom” scenes from within the Jolley corpus may well play a part in determining how one responds to the suggestion Miss Thorne begins to make to Miss Snowdon. Each reader’s imaginative response however will also depend upon other factors such as such as what is already known of Miss Thorne, her particular qualities of thought and feeling and her idiosyncrasies as well as the reader’s own assumptions and prejudices, the mental associations he or she makes in relation to what is being intimated is about to develop between the two women.

What does actually ensue is a rather playful and erotic water fight. Witnessing this readers are placed in the position of being able to reassess their own initial responses, to juxtapose them with Hopewell’s own imagining and to consider which is the more appropriate in terms of the characters present. That is, the reader becomes an active participant in the creative process.

In Mr Scobie’s Riddle ellipses are present in the text not only in that which is half-spoken but also in the half-thoughts of the elderly inmates. This once again can work to stimulate the reader’s imagination and also often conveys a profound sense of yearning or regret in relation to the patients. In yearning for things remembered from his past Mr Scobie at times simply focusses on familiar smells. Early in the novel he dreams of returning to his own place, “There was nothing sweeter, he thought, than the smell of hay from his own fields …” (MSR, p.51). Much later in the novel when he is once again thinking of places from his past “He remembered the fragrance of lightly dampened earth ...” (MSR, p.138). In both instances the scenes are left incomplete in the sense of the sentences not being finished. Yet the memories, though fragmentary, are
enough in themselves for the reader to then undertake the task of imaginatively supplying the rest of the details for one's self.

Similarly when both Miss Hailey and Mr Scobie begin to dwell upon indiscretions from their pasts there is much in the way of details which is simply not provided. In the past Heather Hailey was in charge of a girls' school. Whilst in this position she elected during one school holiday break to take some of her students to Bayreuth to "show them something of the culture of Europe" (MSR, p.149). Whilst in the nursing hospital an incident occurs which calls to mind this particular holiday for Miss Hailey and the occurrence which was to ruin her career. One learns

Miss Hailey sobbed in her deep voice, drawing hoarse breaths, saying in between her choking sobs, "it's Bianca and Marguerite all over again, those two awful girls! To think that I looked upon them as reliable fourth formers, solid good girls and they did that frightful thing ... And now this ... (MSR, p.149).

It is never actually spelt out for the reader what the "frightful thing" was that had such a dramatic impact upon Heather Hailey's life. Once again it is left to the reader to speculate and imagine, to supply the rest of the details.

The character Mr Scobie is troubled by memories from the past of an indiscretion with a young, female piano student. He remembers being found in an upstairs bedroom with Lina by the housekeeper Fraulein Recha. In his initial remembering of the incident it appears that he and Lina were simply searching for holy pictures in Lina's mother's bedroom. He recollects

she would show him the pictures, she would hunt them out, she insisted, there was one in particular she wanted him to see. Perhaps he would be able to explain it to her (MSR, p.24).

However Mr Scobie avoids recreating the scene in its entirety
either for himself or for the reader. His thoughts come abruptly to an end as he remembers Fraulein Recha walking in on them in the bedroom and her reaction, "And what do you think you want in here?" she asked him in a terrible voice ..." (MSR, p.24). The tone of her voice and the unfinished sentence in the text suggest that there is more to the scene than has been provided by Mr Scobie in this moment of recollecting. One is left to ponder upon this until much later in the novel when the scene is more fully recreated by Mr Scobie himself as he remembers how Lina "pulled him and held him with her strong childish arms and legs" (MSR, p.97).

Jolley's use of the conversational mode allows for many such omissions and for interpretative pluralism. In another scene from Miss Peabody's Inheritance the gaps are used effectively to convey a sense of the more unpleasant qualities of the Australian bush especially as experienced by someone quite unfamiliar with it. Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon are able to indulge in their erotic water fight because their travelling companion Miss Edgely has gone for a walk and has not returned when expected. Time goes by and the evening becomes increasingly cold, dark and windy.

In worrying over Edgely's absence Miss Thorne does not voice her fears completely and yet in her halting conversation it is possible to detect her concern. She says to Snowdon

she will have got herself into a state ... I mean, you remember what the place is like, we walked all round here once, last year wasn't it. Very different in sunshine and with campers and people ... But in the dark, well she wouldn't know which way (MPI, p.30).

Henry Lawson too understood and conveyed in his fiction the changes which are effected on the landscape and in the individual after dark in the bush. In "Past Carin'" he wrote that it is "when the sun goes down on the dark bed of the lonely Bush" that "old things come home to one. And strange, new-old things too, that haunt and depress you terribly, and that you can't understand."4
Miss Thorne's hesitations as she speaks with Miss Snowdon stimulate the imagination as one is drawn to consider for one's self the more frightening and even sinister aspects of the Australian bush at night which might induce Edgely to become panic-stricken. The reader is also left to dwell upon, to imagine, possible reasons to explain Edgely's delayed return, to conjecture as to what has in fact happened to her. In Jolley's fiction the ellipses in the conversations and thought-processes of the characters involve her readers in the creative process, leading them to the consideration of intricacies of character and situation and the contemplation of the subtleties of setting.

Jolley's use of an episodic form is a feature of her writing style which also provides room for the reader to become a participant in the creation of the text. When reviewing the novel Milk and Honey Helen Daniel observes

The narrative works through a deliberate frustration of the reader's desire to know. It works through lacunae, moving along a set of gaps in the explanation.\(^5\)

In Foxybaby the writer Miss Porch discusses the creative process with her students after they have acted out one of the tableaux vivants from her work-in-progress

"The story will come together," she explained, "from these fragments. This is how a story is made (FB, p.96).

Miss Porch could very well be talking about Jolley's writing rather than her own as Elizabeth Jolley's work is often presented to the reader in apparently unrelated fragments.

Sitting in her hotel room the protagonist Vera of Cabin Fever is involved in a quest to find and place for herself recollections of her past experiences in order that she may arrive at a detailed and insightful perception of her life. This novel features a fragmented textual structure and some
readers may find themselves floundering initially with the rapidly changing scenes. Much of the book is retrospective and is written in the manner in which memory operates. Vera explains early in the novel "Memories are not always in sequence, not in chronological sequence" (CF, p.7). She is a character who understands

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties is the piecing together of people and events. This is often a blending together of the present with the past. One remembered thing leads to another. Some match with an exquisite naturalness and others have first to be hunted and caught and then fitted (CF, p.171).

Throughout the novel she is observed effecting this very active mental sifting and sorting process for herself.

As readers of Jolley's work it is necessary to engage in a similar process to that which is undertaken by Vera in the novel Cabin Fever. In order to reach some understanding of the texts the reader often has to work intellectually and imaginatively to fill in the interstices occurring in the narratives. At least two reviewers have likened this piecing-together process to the way in which one might construct a jig-saw. Duncan Graham suggests that Jolley's prose "is like pieces of a jig-saw: some recognisable, others obscure - then they start to fit." When discussing the novel My Father's Moon Katherine England describes it as "an a-chronological marriage of stories (which) comes to the reader like an unmade jigsaw." The image of a jig-saw in relation to the construction of Jolley's work is an apt one as with both the jigsaw puzzle and her prose there is the need for the individual encountering the material to become actively involved in the creative process.

The episodic structure of so many of Jolley's texts means that her readers are often left to make what they will of the fragments they are offered and to find their own answers to the human dilemmas the writing brings to life. In this way one is placed in a position akin to that of the reader-
character Miss Peabody in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*. The narrative structure of this novel is quite disjointed. In the opening four pages of the text for instance the writing ranges over correspondence from the novelist Diana Hopewell in Australia to Dorothy Peabody, excerpts from Hopewell’s work-in-progress, details of Miss Peabody’s humdrum existence in London and her entry into other worlds as she gives over her evenings to the contemplation of herself and of her life in the present and to imagining.

Much of what Miss Peabody receives from Diana Hopewell by way of the novelist’s letters confuses and disturbs Dorothy. It does so because it imaginatively draws her out of her present existence and into other worlds, into other lives, other modes of being, but also because so much of what is offered is not sequential. Upon receiving a letter from Diana Hopewell, Miss Peabody tried to piece together something of the lives of Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon. There was a lack of sequence and she realized she must take each letter as it came and hope that in the end she would reach some sort of understanding (*MPI*, p.11).

Such an approach is helpful not only in relation to Miss Peabody attempting to cope with what Hopewell offers to her but also to the reader of Jolley’s work. It is useful, even necessary, for Jolley’s readers to adopt a similar attitude to the one Dorothy Peabody takes in relation to Hopewell’s novel, accepting what is offered and realising that in so doing the possibility does at least exist that with some intellectual and imaginative effort they may be able to piece the whole thing together and reach some level of understanding for themselves.

When discussing her writing in the autobiographical “A Child Went Forth” Jolley explains “I use small fragments, hints, suggestions of experience” (*FAV*, p.133). These are what she offers to her reader, making implications and leaving room for the reader to imagine, to supply the details, to move towards certain insights and understandings. In her writing this can be a most powerful means of imaginatively involving
the reader.

There is a scene in Miss Peabody's Inheritance where Miss Thorne and her two companions Miss Edgely and the schoolgirl Gwendaline Manners are travelling by train from Munich to Vienna. Whilst en route

Miss Thorne has been dreaming, something very intimate, not frightening really, though almost in its intensity, almost satisfying but not quite, almost on the point of an exquisite feeling (MPI, p.54).

In this small scene Jolley writes to the edge of explicitness and the sexual overtones of the description are unmistakeable. Whatever the actual content of the dream it is apparent that what Miss Thorne experiences is at least potentially climactic. Jolley herself is never so obvious however as to actually state that in this situation her character is on the verge of experiencing an orgasm. Nevertheless the writing is highly suggestive and this is one possible interpretation.

Later in Vienna Miss Thorne talks to Miss Snowdon about an idea which occurred to her whilst travelling in the train. The idea is that she, Miss Thorne, will take it upon herself to create a patron saint for her school Pine Heights. The exchange which follows builds upon the suggestiveness of the earlier scene. The conversation begins with Miss Snowdon voicing a concern of a theological nature in relation to Miss Thorne's proposal

"But it takes at least four hundred years for the evolution, or whatever it's called, for a saint."
"How d'you mean?"
"Well, I mean saints don't just come overnight."
"Mine," Miss Thorne unwraps a second sweet, "Mine occurred in about two minutes during a tunnel" (MPI, p.56).

Clearly there is a shift in the latter part of this conversation and a double entendre implicit in both Miss Snowdon's final
remark and in Miss Thorne's too.

Often in Jolley's writing much is implied without actually being stated not simply in relation to the experiences of the individual but also in terms of relationships between characters. Attachments and tensions between individuals are often implied subtly, just hinted at. Little suggestive moments are created which point to particular relationships either existing or developing, creating opportunities for imaginative speculation on the reader's part.

Such is the case as one witnesses the gradual unfolding of the relationship between Edgely and Thorne in Miss Peabody's Inheritance. It becomes increasingly apparent that this is quite a complex relationship with strong and often confused emotions lurking just beneath the surface and that each woman in her own way needs the other. As Miss Thorne reflects:

Even if discouraged brutally Miss Edgely would never leave. For one thing she has simply nowhere in the world where she can go. Facing this, Miss Thorne knows that, without Edgely, she herself has no one (MPI, p.59).

The intricacies of the relationship as it exists between these two women are left largely to the reader to imaginatively piece together.

Early in the novel Thorne, Edgely and Snowdon are encountered taking a short holiday. Whilst travelling "For the whole of the long car ride (Edgely) has been brooding on the awful thing Miss Thorne said the night before "(MPI, p.19). It is not revealed at this stage what the "awful thing" uttered actually was and so a small moment of suspense is created in the narrative. Later Miss Thorne herself has reason to consider the "stormy scene" (MPI, p.24), the "distressing scene" (MPI, p.25) she has been involved in with Edgely. It transpires that what has occasioned the conflict between the two women is Miss Thorne explaining to Edgely that she has invited Gwendaline Manners to accompany them to Europe for a
holiday. Edgely's response to this proposal is extreme. Thorne remembers that Edgely "all but smashed the place up" (MPI, p.26). Such an aggressive and passionate response points to the complexity of and tensions inherent in the relationship.

During a conversation with Snowdon whilst on holiday Miss Thorne remembers

the other day we were discussing Othello and the destructive force of jealousy, the unreasonable fury of jealousy (and Edgely) chipped in changing the subject with some perfectly footling thing (MPI, p.25).

Jealousy is obviously an emotion Edgely experiences in her relationship with Miss Thorne and goes some way towards explaining the ferocity of her response. Further on in the narrative when Thorne, Edgely and Gwendaline Manners are all together in Grinzing it becomes apparent that the relationship between the two older women is, at least sporadically, a sexual one and that Gwendaline Manner's presence poses a real emotional threat for Edgely.

In an interview with Jennifer Ellison Jolley discusses the scene where Edgely and Thorne are naked and in bed together whilst staying at Grinzing. She tells a story from her own experiences which emphasizes the powerful effect simply making an implication when writing can have on the mind of the reader. Jolley explains

In Miss Peabody, you see, I did really quite a terrible scene between Edgely and Thorne before Gwenda comes around and knocks on the door, and then I do a very slight picture there, and at one book club where I was a woman said, "How could you write such a filthy scene?" What she's done is to see what I wrote in my early writing, but I only imply something, you see. There's nothing really filthy written there at all. So I thought that was very interesting, that even though I had removed the whole thing, but just made an implication, it
was still there.\textsuperscript{8}

Such implications in the writing do have the potential to impact at a quite profound level upon the reader's imagination.

In the novel \textit{Foxybaby} there is much which is hinted at in terms of the relationships which exist between the central character Alma Porch and the other characters in the novel. The implications of much of what is written in the body of the text gives meaning to the final pages of the novel, provides a perspective on a conclusion which could otherwise be considered both surprising and not-a-little disappointing if the subtle nuances of these relationships were overlooked.

Alma Porch has much in common with many of the characters in the novel and this is clearly established and then reinforced throughout the novel. Alma is introduced to the college factotum Miles as “Miss Alma Porch, a writer of books” (\textit{FB}, p.121). Miss Harrow, another character, has also published a book “a sort of novel, autobiographical of course” (\textit{FB}, p.193). Miss Harrow’s book however was not kindly received by reviewers and she has found it after it has been “tossed on to trays marked Rubbish Boxes” (\textit{FB}, p.193). Miss Porch is able to at least sympathise with this experience and shudders when she thinks “It could so easily be her own book” (\textit{FB}, p.194).

As well as having certain authorial concerns in common Miss Porch and Miss Harrow also sound surprisingly alike when they speak. Discussing with Miss Peycroft the music to be used for the dramatic representation of her work Alma makes the point quite clearly that she will not be using the Greek chorus music suggested by Miss Peycroft

“Mine,” Miss Porch said stiffly, “is definitely solid rock, punk rock and disco” (\textit{FB}, p.33).

When talking with Miss Porch much later in the novel Miss Harrow objects to “those awful tapping sticks and that frantically bad cello” and suggests that they “should be having a bit of solid rock or punk rock, and what on earth’s wrong
with the disco beat?” (*FB*, p.159). Miss Porch herself is aware of similarities existing between herself and Miss Harrow. She sees herself “dressed in one of Miss Harrow’s Arabian costumes” (*FB*, p.231) and also hears herself speaking like Miss Harrow on occasion

“Wherever,” she said to herself in a voice very like Miss Harrow’s, “Wherever can those two young men find any food to serve” (*FB*, p.231).

Mrs Viggars and Alma Porch also have much in common. Mrs Viggars is a would-be writer. She says to Alma at one stage “I have written something and would be very glad of your opinion” (*FB*, p.190). Mrs Viggars, one learns, has come to the college because she is lonely (*FB*, p.254). Alma too experiences loneliness and understands that the profound despair she feels is “part of the loneliness which accompanied writing” (*FB*, p.116). Mrs Viggars like Alma Porch is not only lonely but also quite alone having “no-one to belong to and no-one belonging to her” (*FB*, p.254). In the creation of both Miss Harrow and Mrs Viggars it is possible to detect facets of Alma Porch’s own personality and circumstances.

The character Jonquil Castle is one whom Alma Porch knows surprisingly well. Although only recently acquainted Alma is able to foreshadow accurately the way in which Jonquil will shorten her grandchildren’s names from Jonathon and Bristow to “Jonty” and “Bristy” (*FB*, p.60) long before Mrs Castle herself ever uses these abbreviations (*FB*, p.128). In a scene where Alma is conversing with Jonquil the observation is made that “Mrs Castle’s voice seemed to be in Miss Porch’s pillow” (*FB*, pp. 173-4). It becomes increasingly apparent as the novel progresses that a close relationship exists between Alma Porch and the other characters in *Foxybaby* and that she often has quite an intimate understanding of those around her. The way has been imaginatively prepared for the reader to accept the final scene where Alma wakes to find that she is still on the bus and just arriving at her destination and that the whole thing has been a dream by the implications in the writing which suggest that these characters are actually Alma’s own imaginative creations.
As one nears the end of Jolley's stories it often becomes apparent that there are simply not enough pages left for all the complexities of life which the writing brings to life to be neatly resolved. In the book *Facing Writers* David Malouf discusses the conclusions to his own works and states

I'm always interested in that, I mean, in making endings not be definitive clunks that shut the thing off in time and in some way keep it continuous.9

In Jolley's work a similar bias is apparent. The endings to her stories are often better described in terms of being new beginnings with the opening up of possibilities occurring rather than there being any attempt at a harmonious rounding off or resolving of human dilemmas.

In the concluding pages of *The Sugar Mother* Edwin Page's life is still so problematical that he feels "A war would solve everything. World War Three, he held up his sparkling glass towards the light. World War Three" (SM, p.209). With the aeroplane that his wife Cecilia is returning to Australia on having been diverted to Cairo and with Leila, her baby and her mother having relocated themselves next-door to his house once more there is still much within this university lecturer's life which he will have to work through.

At the end of *The Well* Hester Harper reflects "What was it the woman on the other side of the chair in Grossman's said about the story having to be a narrative fiction told by someone who has actually had the experience" (TW, p.175). She then begins to relate to the two little Borden boys a story, a story which in its opening sounds very much as if it could be the story on which the novel *The Well* itself is based

"It was one dark night," she tells them, "along this very road only much farther on ... something ... happened ..." (TW, p.175).

As life and fiction begin to coalesce for Hester she assumes a new role as story-teller.
In the novel *Foxybaby* it becomes apparent as the novel concludes that the protagonist's journey has been one of the mind and of the imagination undertaken whilst she is dozing on the bus. *Foxybaby* ends with Alma Porch arriving at the school where she is about to take up a new position for the summer. For Alma “the end of the dream” (*FB*, Thomas Hardy epigraph) has arrived and now that she is awake she prepares to step into the reality of her new position.

In *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* at the novel's end Dorothy Peabody having travelled halfway around the world to begin a new phase of her life sits down to begin the task of completing Hopewell's book for her. There is still much which Dorothy will need to think through imaginatively in order to finish the novel she has inherited mid-sentence. It has been left to Miss Peabody to follow through the implications, to explore the ramifications and to unravel the complexities of the experiences and inter-relationships Hopewell's novel has presented so far. She may well feel the need to sort out the more problematical aspects of each character's life into some kind of harmonious order for this budding author by her own admission loves “happy endings” (*MPI*, p.129). Hopewell herself may have had something completely different in mind for her characters. In both cases the reader of *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* is only able to speculate upon possible outcomes. In so doing one may be led to a perception similar to that which Dorothy reaches in the final pages of the novel. As she becomes the story-teller and gives free rein to her imagination she realises that there are “enormous possibilities” (*MPI*, p.157).

In *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* we as readers witness yet another reader Dorothy Peabody becoming personally enriched as she steps into the world of imagining and becomes an active participant in the creative process of story-telling. Many of the characters in Jolley's fiction are in some way involved with the narrative process. Miss Porch of *Foxybaby*, Miss Hailey of *Mr Scobie's Riddle* and Jasmine Tredwell of the short story “Woman in a Lampshade” (*WL*, pp.137 - 49) are all writers when one first encounters them. Other characters
such as Adams in "Adam's Bride" (WL, pp.10 - 38), Irma Rosen in "Paper Children" (WL, pp.82 - 100), Hester Harper in The Well and Dorothy Peabody in Miss Peabody's Inheritance assume the role of story-teller at some stage.

When reviewing Miss Peabody's Inheritance Pam Gilbert observes "Jolley's novel plays with the possibilities of writing providing alternative modes of being to readers."10 For Miss Peabody the role of story-teller is one which she has in many ways been groomed to assume and which does indeed offer her alternative modes of being. The author Diana Hopewell writes to her and tells her "It is a tremendous pleasure to initiate a person" (MPI, p.34). It is Hopewell who initiates Dorothy into the actual craft of story-telling and in particular into the world of imagining. During the course of their correspondence Hopewell provides Peabody with summaries of her characters (MPI, p.3), explains how characters may and indeed often do develop in unexpected ways as the writer's exploration of them deepens (MPI, p.74), discusses how she structures her stories (MPI, p.33) and draws Dorothy's attention to particular points of authorial concern such as the use of cliches (MPI, p.68). She gives Miss Peabody insights which according to Hopewell the reader does not necessarily have to have but which the writer may well wish to keep in mind (MPI, p.33). There is quite a systematic laying bare of the mechanics of the story-telling process by Hopewell for her acquaintance, or perhaps more accurately her apprentice, Miss Peabody.

Stimulated by Diana's writing Miss Peabody the reader begins to imagine. As she is exposed to new ways of thinking and feeling, seeing and being through her correspondence with the novelist, Dorothy begins to effect changes in her own life which has been extremely dull, predictable and constrained. Behind the transformation which occurs in Miss Peabody's life it is possible to recognise the powerful and potentially liberating effects of the imagination at work. For Diana Hopewell imagining offers a release from illness, pain and her wheelchair confinement. As an author she provides for Dorothy Peabody opportunities to become involved in the creative process and to step into the world of imagining for herself.
The effects of this in relation to Dorothy's life are similarly liberating.

Throughout her fiction Jolley's exploration of the complex relationship between author and reader emphasizes the immense and potentially transforming possibilities which present themselves when one is given the opportunity to "indulge the power of fiction and send imagination out upon the wing" (FB, p.8). Using a range of techniques her writing explores the powerful emancipative possibilities of the imagination and the immense collaborative possibilities between reader and author in relation to the creative process.
NOTES


Chapter 7. Exploring the Imaginative and Symbolic Possibilities of the Non-Human World in *Milk and Honey*

Elizabeth Jolley's detailed and imaginative apprehension of the natural world occupies a central position in her work. Although she shares with such authors as Martin Boyd, Patrick White and David Malouf an ability to handle other than Australian settings she characteristically draws upon her observations of her immediate surroundings to provide much of the setting for her work. In this sense she is a regional writer yet this quality in her writing is not a limiting one. The challenge for Jolley as an author lies not so much in simply describing a scene or a place or a town which actually exists as in exploring and realising the immense imaginative and symbolic possibilities of setting.

In his "Study of Thomas Hardy" published posthumously in *Phoenix* D. H. Lawrence wrote "There exists a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it." As with Hardy's work Jolley's writing concerns itself with the lives of her characters set amidst the non-human world and in particular in relation to the swiftly changing processes of nature. Such a comparison with Hardy is not out of place for when asked of the authors she likes to read Jolley has replied in part

And Hardy, funnily enough. I love reading Hardy's novels. See, I don't read for the story but rather for the dwelling in the novel, the attention to the details, the ramifications.

Jolley's writing imaginatively and faithfully records the myriad details of an ever-changing external world, celebrating its fragile and transient qualities, making it and remaking it in an ever-shifting play of consciousness in which the non-human world is often represented as the external correlative
to the human action and experience of the story.

In considering Jolley's representation of the natural world one is reminded that literature has its source both in the world observed by the author and in the author's own imagination. This is what the novelist Diana Hopewell in Miss Peabody's Inheritance refers to as "the fiction which is mounted on the truth" (*MPI*, p.137). She goes on to explain "The writer creates the imagined land from fragments of the real thing" (*MPI*, p.137). The evocation of setting in Jolley's writing works at a concrete level as belonging to an actual and carefully observed landscape often recognisable for its West Australian origins and at a symbolic level where the wealth of imaginative possibilities pertaining to place, season, atmosphere, fauna and flora are continually being developed.

The "dwelling" in Jolley's writing, to adopt her rather eccentric use of the word, is invariably one with which she is familiar - sometimes English or European but more likely to be Australian. For Jolley

Writers are regional. Their themes might be universal, but their backgrounds and settings, because of where they live, very often will be their region.³

Two particular environments, the suburban one of Claremont in Perth where she settled with her husband and their three children in 1959 and the rural one of five acres which she purchased subsequently in the Eastern Hills forty miles from Perth, provide much of the setting for Jolley's writing.

However the regional input into her work is of course not simply confined to the land she owns herself. She has travelled extensively throughout various parts of Western Australia as well as interstate and incorporates much of what she has seen and experienced into the settings in her fiction. She explains

if one of my characters pushes a dead body down a well on a dog-leg of land, or if another character
gets lost in the cold dampness below the Wave Rock, or another spills scalding hot tea into her lap in a remote road-house - and yet another loses his sense of direction on the lonely tracks across unending paddocks it is because of the opportunities I had, for a time, to go out under the Arts Access Scheme to conduct workshops in the far away places which would otherwise have simply remained, for me, unseen and forever out of reach.4

Jolley uses the Western Australian landscape as she observes it, attempts to be accurate in her descriptions of flora and fauna and within her novels and short stories uses an appropriate seasonal patterning. Her writing does have a distinctly regional flavour and it is in this sense that Kerryn Goldsworthy is able to group her with other Australian writers, identifying their particular areas as "Malouf's Brisbane, Garner's Melbourne, Astley's North Queensland, Jolley's Western Australian wheatfields and Winton's Western Australian south-west coast."5 However in acknowledging what is regional in Jolley's use of setting it is also important to recognise that the regionalism is never insistently dominant in a parochial sense. A study of Jolley's use of setting reveals that it is one of her main talents as an author that she is able to give the materials of place and time a significance which is both placeless and timeless, probing issues of general and perennial concern and giving the reader a rich sense of the movements and complexities of human experience.

Anthony Hassall in The New Penguin Literary History of Australia discusses the work of Randolph Stow, Patrick White and Henry Handel Richardson and explains that all three of these authors use landscape "at crucial times in the narrative to reflect the inner geography of character."6 In Jolley's fiction too there is an obvious alliance fostered between character and setting in which the non-human world often becomes the external correlative to the human event. Much of what happens and what the characters experience in her stories is carefully interwoven with and indeed dependent
upon the poetic evocation of the non-human world. In the writing this is all part of what Chris Prentice in his essay "Writing Into the Land: The Textual Mediation of Relationships to the Land in Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction" refers to as being her "literary appropriation of landscapes as metaphors for characters' emotions and relationships." 7

Jolley's characters are continually presented as belonging to, being tied and responding to the natural world in very direct and fundamental ways. Laura for instance in *Palomino* when thinking of her "nightly excursions into tenderness" (P, p.125) remembers that "Last night the fragrance of the honeysuckle was intoxicating, it somehow became part of our love-making" (P, p.126). In the novel *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* Miss Peabody writes to the novelist Diana Hopewell expressing her enjoyment of and heightened response to the fictitious novel *Angels on Horseback*. Miss Peabody explains to Hopewell "the loneliness and the harshness of the Australian countryside fitted so exactly with my own feelings"(*MPI*, p.5).

The characteristics of the landscape as described by Miss Peabody and the sense she has of being at one with the Australian countryside call to mind Eddie Twyborn's response in *The Twyborn Affair* when he returns to Australia from Europe and is confronted with harsh elemental conditions and a "bitter landscape" 8 during his stay on the Monaro. In this milieu Eddie finds that gradually the "loss of faith in himself (is) replaced by an affinity with the landscape surrounding him." 9 The representation of the non-human world in Jolley's writing has much in common with that in Patrick White's work. In both instances the natural world is presented as a moving, changing and active backdrop to the human action of the novel with a complex interrelationship being developed between setting and the characters who inhabit it. Indeed the use of the non-human world as something which is both imitative and interactive is present in the work of many Australian writers.

In her introductory essay to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* Judith Wright argues that "in Australian writing the
landscape has, it almost seems, its own life."¹⁰ She goes on to explain

Australia has from the beginning of its short history meant something more to its new inhabitants than mere environment and mere land to be occupied, ploughed and brought into subjection. It has been the outer equivalent of an inner reality; first and persistently, the reality of exile; second, though perhaps we now tend to forget this, the reality of newness and freedom.¹¹

Although this work of Wright's was published in 1965 her comments are still highly relevant to Elizabeth Jolley's writing. In Jolley's stories characters are presented in relation to the settings created around them. In various contexts characters are witnessed experiencing exile, alienation, marginalisation, struggling to make sense of their own worlds and of society in general. In Jolley's writing the development of such thematic concerns is often dependent upon her characteristic responsiveness to the natural world and her reliance upon evanescent shades of meaning in the evocation of setting.

When discussing the role of the natural world in short fiction published from the 1920's through to the 1950's Kerryn Goldsworthy in The Penguin New Literary History of Australia mentions the work of such writers as Vance Palmer, Katharine Susannah Pritchard, Alan Marshall and Peter Cowan and observes

few of the stories named ... are simply 'animal stories'; rather, they are stories which use birds and animals as metaphors or correlatives or totems for what is going on in the minds and hearts of their human characters - a sort of D. H. Lawrence mode, with more humour and less sex.¹²

Jolley herself writes from within this particular literary tradition. However it is important to note that her imaginative use of setting is not restricted simply to the
natural world. Rather she creates complex interrelationships between her characters and the various non-human, external settings and natural icons featured in her work.

In his discussion of some of the preoccupations in Jolley’s fiction Andrew Riemer considers her imaginative use of setting and what he terms “the confounding of inside and out.” He argues that

this facet of her imaginative world receives its most extended manifestation in *Milk and Honey*, for the curiously claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel is specifically linked with the circumstances and the predicament (sic) of its characters.

While I made some quite critical comments about *Milk and Honey* in Chapter Three of this thesis there is much about the novel which works well, in particular Jolley’s imaginative use of the non-human world. There are several settings featured in the novel *Milk and Honey* - the Heimbachs’ old and rambling house, the accompanying garden and the nearby environs of wasteland, mental hospital and cemetery. In each of these environments the setting assumes different aspects depending upon the mood, disposition and experiences of the characters involved. Often one encounters characters experiencing some kind of peace in environments which suggest placidity and serenity, growing love coinciding with the advancing of the seasons, developmental crises in the characters’ lives corresponding with unsettled weather or the onset of a storm. In this novel as in much of Jolley’s writing the non-human, external world is evoked poetically in such a way as to complement, extend and refine one’s appreciation of the human action and experience of the novel.

In *Milk and Honey* the Heimbachs’ house is so situated that it is necessary when walking from it to pass through the swampy wasteland and the grounds of the mental hospital in order to reach the cemetery. The protagonist Jacob completes this trek one evening and there is a definite sense of foreboding in the rich suggestiveness of the writing. Jacob walks around the swamp with its “Pale, dead trees” and ring
of “smouldering fires, flames leaping up here and there” encountering “a sharp smell of rot and decay” (MH, pp.131 - 2). The scene is very carefully built around images of flames, rot, death and decay. There is a heightened sense of the ebbing of time with the advancing of evening and with Jacob’s longing “for the real and the last burial” (MH, p.132). The passions of the lovers Madge and Jacob when they meet in the cemetery are placed firmly in the shadow of death. As their desire quickens the two escape, at least for the moment, but one is prepared imaginatively through Jolley’s use of setting to expect that in this relationship one may well soon come across a tragic situation or perhaps more precisely a death.

Without putting too fine a point on it I would also suggest that Jolley’s use of the natural imagery here and elsewhere in the novel intimates that it will be Madge who dies. In this passage Madge is wearing a pink dress and stockings. She is described as having “short, fat legs” (MH, p.132) and is shown grunting, scuffling and panting about on the dry grass. While she likens her colouring to that of a pig (MH, p.132) there is another animal in the novel which is described in similar terms to those used in relation to Madge. The Daisy dog Jacob buys for Louise has a “squat” body (MH, p.109) and is an “ugly dog” (MH, p.99). Madge describes herself as being “ugly” (MH, p.92) in a conversation with Jacob. The dog also has a “pink body” (MH,p.137) calling to mind Madge’s attire in the cemetery and, like the somewhat vulgar Australian woman, offers Jacob “little snatches of freedom” (MH, p.99). Not long after the scene in the cemetery the reader discovers that “Something had happened to the little Daisy dog ... She had disappeared” (MH, p.137) foreshadowing Madge’s demise.

Through her imaginative use of the non-human world Jolley achieves a maximum of suggestiveness with her carefully interwoven detail. In a later scene which in many ways parallels the cemetery scene Jacob returns to the Heimbachs’ house having taken Tante Rosa to the house near the river. The cemetery has been described in the earlier scene in terms which could well be applied to the Heimbachs’ own household, a “remote” place and a “world far away from
the squat brick and concrete suburb" (*MH*, p.132). The Heimbach’s household is isolated in a social sense however rather than being geographically isolated as is the case with the cemetery.

Jacob is not long at the household before he thinks “I must escape and meet Madge” (*MH*, p.145). Running in the garden he discovers Madge’s body rolled in a carpet. The exposition which follows is, at least in part, a vivid restatement of the imagery used in the cemetery scene with its images of death and dissolution, flames and fading light. The whole place, tables, trunks, treasures, money, is being “eaten by fire” (*MH*, p.147) and the flames fatally burn Tante Rosa and permanently disfigure Jacob. The fire is a cause of great suffering but in imaginatively linking it with the earlier swamp fire the way is made clear for an appreciation of it as being also a cleansing fire. The suggestion is that just as with the swamp in Jacob’s own life this natural element has a purgative role to play and that if some kind of harmony and order are to be re-established in his life then the old world must be swept away and Jacob must be free of it insofar as that is possible.

Characteristically in Jolley’s writing there is an intensity of imaginative engagement which works to create the impression of the external world and the world of human experience as essentially and often subtly corresponding to one another. The mulberry tree is a continual point of reference in the novel Milk and Honey and is a central and powerful Leitmotiv. This tree, laden with fruit or “sad” (*MH*, p.7) and bare depending upon the season, is ever-present in the lives of those individuals inhabiting the Heimbachs’ house. Waldemar hides and plays in it, Jacob paces under it, Madge dies near it. It is most conspicuous in the major scenes. After sharing a climactic love-making with Madge, Jacob walks in the cold and remembers the intimate interlude,

“Thank you oh thank you,” (he) said softly and was face to face with the gnarled trunk of the sad mulberry tree (*MH*, p.94).
When Jacob discovers his wife Louise locked in an incestuous embrace with the naked Waldemar he runs and "Straight away ... was under the mulberry tree surrounded by the oleander and the overgrown bushes" (MH, p.145). At the time when Louise gives birth to Jacob's putative daughter

the mulberry tree, at the end of the garden, was in full, thick leaf and covered in berries. The air every day was warm and heavy with the over-ripe fruit fermenting (MH, pp. 129 -30).

The parallel fecundity here is unmistakeable and does not augur well for Louise's offspring given the many and particular associations which cluster around Jolley's imagining of the mulberry tree.

In its physical massiveness the mulberry tree resembles a house. Within the novel there is a deft juxtaposing of the humanly constructed house and its occupants with this naturally occurring "house". The mulberry tree is an old tree and one not native to the soil in which it has taken root. Like so many of Jolley's characters the Heimbachs are not indigenous to Australia having come from an older European civilisation. The protagonist Jacob also has strong links with this older civilisation. He remembers

My father had come with my mother and my mother's family some twenty years earlier and I grew up among these people who were foreigners and learned English from them. It was a strange language for them so my accent was strange (MH, p.27).

The Heimbachs' house too it seems has come from somewhere else, at least in terms of its design. When Jacob first sees it it reminds him of "an Austrian Schloss ... especially the broken steps and the crumbling arches of the courtyard" (MH, p.11). In presenting the house and the lives of the occupants in close association with the mulberry tree Jolley draws parallels which are of assistance in defining the characters' inner experiences.
When the mulberry tree is first described “The leaves were thick and green and the old branches were gnarled and twisted like branches in the pictures of fairy tales” (MH, p.12). The use of the word “twisted” here is most suggestive and is one which is elsewhere applied in relation to the characters in the novel. The link is quite clear and simple. Just as the tree is “twisted” so too are many of the characters in that there are distortions of character existing which are as readily recognisable as the twisted branches of a tree. The connections between the mulberry tree, other icons and the lives of the characters are presented steadily and imaginatively throughout the novel.

The proem to Milk and Honey concerns itself with cones which originating from “the soot and the dirt, the horse manure, the brickdust and the thistledown” of Europe are blown a great distance until finally coming to rest in another hemisphere. Some of these cones “as they fall ... pressed closer and closer into themselves as if this was their only means of surviving.” Such an introduction to the novel establishes a parallel between these cones and the insular Heimbachs of the novel proper who, upon migrating to Australia, are concerned before all else with survival in the form of the protection and preservation of their personal and cultural identity.

These cones are formed in a “twisting movement”. Beginning with the proem the cumulative effect of the images Jolley poetically evokes in the writing is to point to the correspondingly twisted nature of the Heimbachs’ household and the influence of such a household upon the life of Jacob. The smallness of the Heimbachs’ world, the seriousness with which it takes itself, the tedium and claustrophobia of its life, the myriad illusions and deceits, the particular emotional and sexual demands the characters make on each other, the complex half-rationalized, half-realised fears of the inhabitants all powerfully come to life in this environment overshadowed by the mulberry tree and bursting with an over-abundance of devotion and fermenting, over-ripe mulberries. It is into this milieu that Jacob is brought as a boy and this
character is then observed changing, twisting, through the pressure of these circumstances.

In *Wuthering Heights* Heathcliff at the time of Hindley's death when he is left to raise Hareton mutters "Now, my bonny lad, you are mine! And we'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!" Jacob has also been left to be raised by people other than his natural parents and he does become twisted physically, socially, sexually and emotionally. In the novel Jacob is described as being externally twisted. About a year after he goes to live with the Heimbachs he develops a twitch. This twitch is painful and twists his face on several occasions such as when he inspects a house that he eventually decides to rent (*MH*, pp.106-7), when he visits his father's vineyard (*MH*, p.46) and when he confronts his wife and her aunts about Madge's death and starts a fire which destroys his life as he has hitherto known it and is forced to go out into the world (*MH*, p.147).

In each of these instances the twitching and the twisting of his face have occurred when Jacob has had reason to venture into the outside world. These facial contortions signal his fear of the society which he has lived in but remained aloof from for so many years. He is in effect socially crippled, unable to interact with the world in an open and productive manner. He explains to Madge at one stage in the novel

> I tried to go with my uncle to see my father's vineyard once more. I couldn't go. Madge, your breasts are sweet but I must tell you, my face twisted up. You must have seen my face. I was afraid to go out into the outside world with him. Madge, I was afraid. My face hurt (*MH*, p.96).

His social perceptions are similarly restricted. The house he rents from the real-estate agent Mr Williams belongs to an ophthalmic surgeon and Jacob gives himself over to imagining "patients huddled in the other room waiting to crawl helplessly, eyes full of pus or overgrown with fungus" (*MH*, p.105). His perceptions of life and of the outside world are generally narrow and unbalanced tending towards the extreme
and the grotesque.

As an adult Jacob's sexual relations with the women in his life are also characterised by those tendencies. Madge recognises the perverse nature of his relationship with her. He remembers

She said it was strange too that the only time we had really made love, that was how she said it, was when Louise was asleep just the other side of the half open door \((MH, p.93)\).

His relationship with his wife Louise is also perverse as well as being both exceedingly complex and problematical.

Upon marrying Louise Jacob is most reluctant to consummate the marriage. This has much to do with his perceptions of her which are quite unrealistic or "twisted". He oscillates between regarding her with reverence as something of an ingenue, child-like and innocent, to thinking of her in quite colourful, even grotesque, terms as the very experienced lover in a sexual situation which has strong sadomasochistic overtones. After the wedding Jacob is unwilling to make the transition from platonic childhood companion to erotic partner even though Louise assures him "It is alright, we are husband and wife, it is expected" \((MH, p.75)\). When dancing with Louise at the wedding breakfast it seems to Jacob "as if (they) were children again" \((MH, p.71)\). Later that night when he goes to the bed which has been prepared for him and Louise he takes her hand and presses it. This hand to him seems "small and childish" \((MH, p.75)\).

Contrasted with this perception of Louise as being still very much a child is Jacob's description of her in the scene he apparently witnesses between his wife and Waldemar in the attic. Jacob recollects

I pushed open the door and saw Waldemar naked, asleep, on the dishevelled bed. His blonde hair was long, it was almost white. With a shock I saw that what I thought was a smooth, dark, silky beard
under his full, wet mouth was the long, dark hair of a woman. She lay as if crushed under the weight of the huge body. Her legs, in knee-length, mulberry-coloured, leather boots were crossed over the fat, white buttocks. The long, sharp heels of the boots seemed to pierce his flesh as though, by her act, she had pinned him to her (MH, p.144).

In this scene the mulberry-coloured boots become a particular focus of interest. The word "mulberry" once again brings to mind the dominant natural icon of the mulberry tree and its twisted characteristics. In the scene as perceived or imagined by Jacob there are qualities which may also be regarded as twisted in the siblings' relationship.

Through Jacob's eyes the relationship appears to be an incestuous one and also one which has sado-masochistic overtones. If there has been pleasure as suggested by the "dishevelled bed", Waldemar's nakedness and the two now sleeping and perhaps satiated participants, it is interlaced in the description with images of pain. Louise is "crushed" under Waldemar and the sharp heels of her boots seem to "pierce his flesh". The two individuals are perceived as being "pinned" together by these "long, sharp heels". The distinctive mulberry colour links Louise's boots with the twisted mulberry tree and at a symbolic level alerts the reader to existing distortions apparent in the human action and experience of the scene.

However remembering the complexities inherent in Jolley's writing one must be wary of assuming that only one interpretation of the scene is possible for the imagery employed here is highly suggestive and invites interpretative pluralism. This scene as described is filtered through Jacob's consciousness and it may well be the case that in the process he invests it with qualities borne of his own distinctive and perverse imagination. Preceding the scene in the attic room Jacob reflects "Whenever I could not see Louise I imagined her up in that hidden away place at the top of the house" (MH, p.138). Shortly afterwards on just such an occasion when Louise is not in sight he apparently goes to the attic room and
finds her there with Waldemar. It may well be that Jacob has in fact once again slipped into reverie and is actually imagining the whole scene. Even if this is not what happens one is still nevertheless aware that if Jacob is describing an actual scene he has witnessed his perceptions are coloured by the involvement of his imagination and by his quite "twisted" way of seeing things.

Louise in Jacob’s earlier estimation is a person who knows “nothing about modern things” (MH, p.82). When he makes the suggestion to her that she should adjust her dresses to make them more fashionable she just laughs and remains “buttoned and tied with tapes into hers” (MH, pp.90 - 1). She is ignorant of many quite basic personal conveniences and has to be instructed by Jacob in the use of deodorant, talcum powder and perfume (MH, p.82). It is unlikely that this young female character, living such a cloistered existence, would even possess a pair of “knee-length, mulberry-coloured, leather boots” (MH, p.144). The mulberry-coloured boots fetish is far more in keeping with an imagination like Jacob’s which is readily stimulated by the sensuousness of black velvet curtains (MH, p. 105), “soft and deep and thick” grey carpet (MH, p.105) and “black sheets and an orange counterpane” (MH, p. 112).

Jolley’s use of the external environment in her writing is intelligent, complex and highly suggestive. Her representation of an endlessly changing non-human world using a succession of quite powerful and carefully interwoven images adds shades of definition to the human action and experience in her stories. Along with other Australian writers she creates settings which are both imitative and interactive. For the reader of her work this means that there are always aspects of the external world which one can be or perhaps needs to be aware of when attempting to understand the inner as well as the more public lives and experiences of her characters. My own analysis of various scenes from the novel Milk and Honey makes no claim to offering definitive readings. Rather it is an attempt to convey some understanding of the richness of the imaginative and symbolic possibilities inherent in Jolley’s use of setting and to demonstrate the extent to which this invites
interpretative pluralism - it often being possible to "read" the same scene in quite different and contradictory ways depending upon the personal response of the reader. Such is the nature of the writing that other readers will see more or at least see differently as it is left to the individual to interpret for her or him self the complexities of thought and nuances of feeling Jolley’s representation of the non-human world symbolically and imaginatively portends.
NOTES


Conclusion

This thesis provides some indication of the versatility, complexity and virtuosity of Elizabeth Jolley’s writing and places her work within the context of existing Australian literature. Her fictions emerge as searching, challenging creations with thematic concerns centring on some of the most basic conditions of human existence - the many absurdities of human life, the values and the pleasures of human subjectivity firmly rooted within the world of time and change, the commonality of human experience particularly in relation to vulnerability, mortality and the internal and external responses to the aging process and to death and the fundamental isolation of human beings from one another. When discussing Jolley’s work in Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays Brenda Walker observes

Jolley’s fiction is an extension of a literary tradition which has been concerned with representation and identity, with the constraints and possibilities of fiction and the attempt to depict the psyche in more than an external and superficial manner. ¹

As an author she is identified in this thesis as not posing some revolutionary challenge to existing literary conventions but rather as working from within and extending particular traditions of Australian literature.

Her writing is characterised by narrative complexity, self-chronicling idiomatic voice and dramatic situation, meticulous attention to detail, symbolic and imaginative subtlety and suggestiveness and the evocation of an imitative and interactive non-human world. Informing her work is a particular kind of intelligent compassion and a special talent for poetic thought and expression which in the writing operates in ways which involve not only herself as author but also the characters she brings to life and her readers in the creative process.
To read one of Jolley's novels is in many ways to be initiated into her territory of the mind, of the intellect and of the imagination. In the writing a wide range of mental landscapes are presented for exploration. Jolley's writing positively crackles with the vivid imagined lives of her many characters. In addition the lack of authorial intrusion and the often quite eccentric structuring of the novels mean that the reader also has to provide imaginative input in order to make sense of, in order to complete the text. As an author Jolley follows the dictum quoted in the novel Foxybaby that "A writer's work is merely to ask questions, not to answer them" (FB, p.230). Time and again in interacting with Jolley's writing readers are challenged to search for further clarity of thought and perception, to extend and refine their understanding of the myriad tragic and comic dimensions of human experience and the inherently powerful and seemingly limitless possibilities of the imagination. Her work is complex, challenging and highly-crafted but it is not, in either form or content, a radical departure from the methods and concerns of other Australian writers such as Patrick White, Kenneth Slessor, Randolph Stow and Henry Handel Richardson. Through her writing she has secured herself a place as a very fine novelist working from within the context of existing Australian literature.
NOTES

Afterword

While this thesis was in the final stages of being written Elizabeth Jolley published a book titled *Central Mischief* (Ringwood: Viking Penguin Books, 1992). This publication is a collection of Jolley's articles, speeches and essays. The book *Central Mischief* does not significantly add to or subtract from my thesis.


WORKS CONSULTED

Elizabeth Jolley's Novels and Short Story Collections

All quotations from the works of Elizabeth Jolley are taken from the following editions. When citing material from these works in the thesis a title abbreviation will be used. This is listed herein parenthetically after the publication information.


The Sugar Mother (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988). (SM).


Articles


Craven, Peter. "A Conjuror of Luminous Memories", The Age Saturday Extra (8 Sept. 1990), p.8


_____ "Elizabeth Jolley: Variations on a Theme", Westerly, Vol. 31, No. 2 (July 1986), pp. 50-63
“Plotting: A Quarterly Account of Recent Fiction”, *Overland*, No. 115 (Aug. 1989), pp. 31-6


Graham, Duncan. “A Jolley Time To Be Had By All”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (1 Sept. 1990), p.74


"727 Chester Road", *Southern Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Nov. 1988), pp. 261-4


"Images of Western Australia Easter Moon Easter Lily", *Westerly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 5-7


"Over the Escarpment: Horace in the Southern Hemisphere?", *Westerly* Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 1985), pp.57-65


"Between Two Worlds - An Approach to Elizabeth Jolley's Fiction", Southerly, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sept. 1983), pp. 239-52


Stead, C. K. "No One Ever Manages to Break Out of This Old Folk's Home", Sydney Morning Herald (29 Jan. 1983), p.33


**Books and Chapters of Books**


Grenville, Kate. *Lilian's Story* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985)


Ireland, David. *The Flesheaters* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972)


Riley, Elizabeth. *All That False Instruction* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975)


_____ *Memoirs of Many in One* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1986)

The Twyborn Affair (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1985)


Wright, Judith. Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1965)

Films

The Nights Belong to the Novelist (1986), Christina Wilcox (dir.).

Recordings

Hayes, Suzanne and Jolley, Elizabeth. Interview conducted at the Adelaide Festival, 1984. A copy of the recording is held at the Chifley Library, Australian National University, Canberra.