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Reading (in/and) *Miranda*

AUSTRALIAN fiction, like that of all nations, is written, published, received and read in the context of a literary canon, both national and transnational. In regards to women's fiction in Australia, this canon is predominantly composed of writers from two particular eras: authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (like Henry Handel Richardson, Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Christina Stead) and women writers who came to prominence during the 1980s (like Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, Elizabeth Jolley, Barbara Hanrahan, Jessica Anderson and Beverley Farmer). While frequently exceeding such bounds, the fictions within this dual canon are predominantly assessed and validated in terms that stress their personal, domestic and realist aspects.¹ This critical emphasis is evident in the predominance of biographies in studies of the earlier women authors, and in the focus on 'women's experiences' in discussion of the more contemporary Australian women writers.

The second-wave feminist movement was responsible for the creation of this dual canon: in the first case, due to a desire to recover and reclaim women writers of the past, and in the second, due to a desire to celebrate and explore contemporary Australian women's fiction. Indeed, it is the preoccupation of second-wave feminism with uncovering and celebrating women's occluded stories that underlies the current critical focus on realist and experiential aspects of Australian women's fiction.² That feminist literary criticism should produce something akin to (though by no means as consolidated or oppressive as) the orthodoxies it critiques is by no means a unique occurrence in feminism's history. Rather, it is a manifestation of the recurrent tension within feminism as it balances its position as an academic discipline with its critique of the patriarchal and masculinist underpinnings of disciplinarity and academia. That feminist literary critics of the late 1980s and early 1990s were able to acknowledge the paradoxical outcome of their endeavours is a testament to the political utility and tenacity of feminism itself. Nonetheless, work on this dual canon of women's fiction still constitutes the vast majority of critical discussion of women's writing in Australia.

Among those whose work has been occluded by the critical attention given to the canonical figures of Australian women's writing, Wendy Scarfe is indicative in various ways. Scarfe's fictions are insistently political, and as such, are resistant to the domestic and personal framework that dominates discussions of

1 See discussions by Gina Mercer, Gillian Whitlock and Bronwen Levy.

2 It is even possible to argue that while feminism has moved beyond the conditions and concerns of its second wave in many disciplines, in relation to discussions of Australian women's fiction it has remained static since the late 1980s.

Australian women writers. For instance, her novel *The Day They Shot Edward* has an anarchist hero, and is concerned with the role of the Industrial Workers of the World during World War I. In the only review this novel received – in the *Anarchist Age Weekly Review*, a source not listed by Austlit – Phil contends that *The Day They Shot Edward* uncovers a ‘rich vein of radical Australian history that has been conveniently forgotten as today’s rulers attempt to redefine the past to suit their current agenda’.

It is hardly the case that Scarfe is alone in writing political novels. Discussions of Amanda Lohrey’s work, for example, frequently note the political emphasis of her fictions. The fact that Lohrey, unlike Scarfe, has received a degree of critical attention merely emphasises the inadequacy of an analysis of reading and reception that attributes critical marginality purely to fictional content. Lohrey’s involvement in the academy (until last year she taught creative writing at the University of Queensland) lends her work a degree of critical visibility, as does the period in which she began publishing, the 1980s (as noted above, a period unmatched – either before or since – in the attention paid to women’s fiction in Australia). In contrast, Scarfe began publishing in the 1960s, at a time when women writers, excepting Thea Astley (who famously described her practice of writing as a man), were less likely to receive attention from literary critics and journalists alike. Scarfe’s temporal position disqualified her for either of the dual literary canons – historic or contemporary – forged by the second-wave feminist movement.

Scarfe’s work is further marginalised by the fact that her books are at least partly self-produced, and published by small, independent enterprises like Seaview and Spectrum. Novels published under such conditions are often ignored by reviewers, and readers more generally, because they are perceived as likely to be unsophisticated: over-written and under-edited. Even the size of Scarfe’s oeuvre – she has written twenty-six books³ – potentially contributes to her critical marginality, as such a volume of publications is generally characteristic of the work of another critically marginalised group: authors of genre fiction. Her inclusion in this category is suggested by the inadequate designation of her fictions as ‘historical’ in the Austlit database, a category that often accompanies ‘romance’ in descriptions of Australian women’s writing. Correspondingly, due to the highly political – and as Scarfe herself contends, philosophical⁴ – nature of her fictions, her novels do not find a general audience with the readers of genre fiction, although the few reviews which have appeared have been in journals of young adult writing. Scarfe’s position in the field of

3 Thirteen written with her husband, Allan Scarfe, are non-fiction; of those of which she is the sole author, the majority are novels. Wendy Scarfe has also published two collections of poetry, *Shadow and Flowers* (1964) and *Dragonflies and Edges* (2004). Of the five reviews of her work listed in Austlit, two were written in 1964 (Steele; Anon), while the remaining three appear in publications concerned with books for young adult readers (Worssam, ‘Fishing’ and ‘Miranda’; Evans).

4 In interview, Scarfe muses, ‘Perhaps I’m always looking ... for philosophical concepts as well as character in books I don’t really feel as if there is a place for this in modern Australian novels’ (Plim 36).

Australian women's fiction is thus characterised by a cycle of inattention, whereby the lack of critical and general attention her work receives both arises from and leads to the necessity of self-production.

In the only published interview with the author, Scarfe's frustration at the factors inhibiting the reception of her writing is evident. Nevertheless, throughout the interview she expresses some uncertainty as to why she has not had a higher profile: 'you don't know whether it's that your work is not fashionable, you don't know whether it's because you're not known or that the book isn't good enough, or if there is some other reason' (Plim 36). Since (and perhaps at least partially in response to) this 1992 interview, Scarfe's novels have manifested a consistent interest in the processes of perception and interpretation. This is particularly evident in the preoccupation in her novels with artistic creation – especially the works of women artists – and the ways in which these are read and received.⁵ In this essay, I want to take up the issue of reading and reception, and of feminist reading in particular, in terms of the way it is thematised in Scarfe's 1998 novel, *Miranda*. In pursuing this theme, I also want to use my reading of *Miranda* to introduce an important and innovative contemporary author to Australian readers. As Plim insists, the fact that Scarfe's fictions have been published by small, independent publishers is not an indictment of the quality of her writing. Rather, her marginal position within Australian writing, publishing and criticism might be indicative of the fact that her 'books bring surprises, differences not usually accepted by mainstream publishers' (Plim 36). In particular, the self-consciously feminist and postmodernist nature of her fictions indicates her 'difference' from what critical commentary has tended to construct as the field of contemporary Australian women's writing.

Miranda is the story of its eponymous narrator, who lives with her autocratic husband and blind mother-in-law in a small coastal town. A talented sculptor, the images Miranda creates and those she describes or imagines function as the basis from which she considers the meaning of art, reality and truth. However, her creativity and thoughts are restricted, almost fatally, by the small-mindedness and dogmatism of her husband, and the hostility of a firmly male-dominated community energised by fundamentalist religion. Scarfe's concern in *Miranda* with depicting, and indeed theorising, the processes of perception and interpretation is indicated even by this short summary. Yet the text does more than reflect upon the process of reading – it repeatedly models it, with Scarfe representing, producing and privileging a mode of reading based on readers' active engagements with the texts. This reading model is particularly interesting for the way in which it provides a foundation from which Scarfe imagines and constructs both intra- and extra-textual feminist reading communities, ones that would be receptive to the fictions she produces. In this way, *Miranda* enables reflection upon questions of reading and readership generally, as well as the ways in which they relate to Scarfe's position in the field of Australian literature.

5 These are themes explored in her three most recent novels: *Jerusha Braddon*, *Painter: a novel*, *Fishing for Strawberries* and *Miranda*.

In *Miranda*, Scarfe consistently represents and privileges a notion of meaning as something which is produced contingently in interactions with the world and the stories in it. A central allegory for this view is offered in one of Miranda's conversations with Joe, the American captain of a whaling ship docked near the unnamed town where she lives.⁶ Telling Joe about Liza, a girl who eloped to California, Miranda recalls, 'She wrote that the oranges there are the same only brighter At least that is how it seemed to her. I suppose that's all it really is.' Noting Miranda's hesitancy, Joe rejoins, 'All? Isn't the seeming everything?' (103). In identifying 'the seeming' as everything, Joe affirms the validity of meanings that are constructed by narrative. This same privileging of 'the seeming' is affirmed in a story Miranda relates from her childhood, where she recalls running to her parents and excitedly yelling, 'There are one hundred and three new chickens.' She chooses this number because 'A hundred seemed like a loose exaggeration, but a hundred and three had the illusion of exactitude as well as the magnificent dimensions of size' (29). Officially, her father counts the chickens, reporting that there are 'Only seven, Miranda. You must tell the truth' (30). Upon realising 'that God would have counted seven chickens also [Miranda] resolved to have nothing more to do with God or truth' (30). Whereas her father speaks of 'truth when he meant precision' (29), Miranda describes herself as '[t]ruthful but not precise' (36): in claiming that there are 'one hundred and three new chickens', Miranda is being truthful to the enormous numerical dimensions she perceives, however childish such a perception might be. This story parodies an understanding of truth that considers only the literal and the verifiable, while implicitly establishing the vulnerability of stories and story tellers to those who are determined to consider only the literal truth. In opposition to her father, Miranda insists that the kind of certainty he displays on this occasion 'was not security: it was tedium' (29).

Although the 'seeming [is] everything' in Scarfe's novel, that does not mean that the practice of interpretation is understood as a search for what is obvious or simplistic. As Miranda insists, '[b]right things weren't interesting. Like the polished surface of a sculpture they were superficial, reflecting light outward.' She prefers 'a rougher surface where light trapped in crannies explored inwards' (125). This differentiation between surface and depth is reinforced by the comparison established between amnesia and memory. Memories, as Miranda asserts, are like rough surfaces: 'Memories wrinkled my past like a fine network of lines which grew more numerous with the years.' They are associated, moreover, with context, with the way 'memories linked [one] to places and to time' (56), which might be seen to have particular resonance for the engagement with narrative that the process of reading requires. 'To have no memory ... to experience life through disconnected jarring incidents; to chase notions which

6 Although Miranda's thoughts and attitudes are contemporary, the reliance of the community on the whaling industry suggests a much earlier setting, whilst also invoking contemporary controversy over the practice of killing whales. These apparently different time periods seem to exist in tension, producing a complicated sense of temporality in the novel. In turn, this prompts questions about the relationship between temporality, history and knowledge.

surfaced like isolated fish in a vast sea ... was horrible' (56). With perception occurring only on the surface or in the moment, amnesia signifies 'a parody of life' (50), a state from which one's understanding of the world can never change or develop.⁷

In contrast, Miranda is depicted as delighting in images of change and transformation that offer multiple meanings. One of these transformative sites is light, to which there are many references. Miranda longs, for instance, to light all the lamps in her husband's shop in order to transform the homogeneity of the shadowy corners with

... texture and dimension, defining [the articles in the shop] by the limits of their individuality, relating them to each other in a pattern of inter-mingled shapes. Nothing lived without light. Things that seemed dead were reborn in it. Light was the resurrection. If I could but light one or two and place them in the darkest corners what designs might unfold for me? (132)

Significantly, Miranda does not imagine light as producing a clear or final meaning. Instead, she wonders about the potential designs that 'might unfold'. When the store is lit, the light transforms the scene, but ambiguously: 'everywhere there were circles of light and shapes that evolved as light pulled and pushed at their edges and intruded into them, prizing out their secrets' (132) but offering no absolute answers.

It is in depictions of Miranda's sculpting that the association between contingency and multiplicity is made particularly explicit. Miranda expresses the desire to create 'movement ... Not the thing itself but the thing disturbed, relationships altered' (49). In this way she longs to 'achieve' a sense of 'action poised between past and future' (102). Her description of 'two white-faced herons balanced on a tree stump' above 'a pool of clear water' offers a sense of what she longs to achieve in sculpture: 'Immobile and intent, their reflections in the water were as solid as my sculpture, an illusion transient as the movement of water but real as the moment' (166). On one level, Miranda's ambition to produce images that privilege fluidity encourages us to believe that reading is an active process. On another level, her meditations pose a philosophical question more particular to literary narrative: does the static nature of the word prevent us from understanding the process of reading in terms of transformation and contingency? Miranda's frustration at the difficulty of portraying her imaginings in material form – 'Why the hell had I chosen to use a medium so damn solid, so fixed in time?' (46) – thereby poses a question about the novel itself.

As with most of Miranda's creative impulses, the forge inspires her to create men's bodies. '[O]n fire with excitement,' she imagines 'mak[ing] thin angular men from whom juice had disappeared ... metal drawn like elastic into strings of arms and legs' (47). However, and in a way that returns us to the difficulties of actualising images of movement and change within solid form (whether metal or

7 This is the situation in which the character John/Helios, who is thematically central to Miranda's desires as an artist, is represented as being. His loss of memory leaves him vulnerable to the stories told by others, a situation emphasised by the fact that he cannot remember his own name.

words), Miranda's attempt to create these men's bodies – to bring her vision into being – is unsuccessful, and her 'fire [is] consumed by the inadequacy of [her] model' (48). Her creation is, like the water, an 'illusion transient as ... movement ... but real as the moment' (166). Miranda's artistic visions compel her to strive continually towards something that can never be fully achieved: the meaning of her visions, in these terms, can never be stable or fully in the image.

Scarfe responds to and resolves this question about the relationship between form and interpretation most fully in her presentation of Miranda's attempts to produce a sculpture of John/Helios, a man she discovers washed up on a reef.⁸ Not only does Miranda reproduce John/Helios's body many times – in her mind, in preparatory drawings, and in the sculpture – her interpretations of his body privilege multiplicity and change, as they also imply a highly charged eroticism. Both of these things are evident, for instance, in Miranda's alignment of his body with fire and light. Visiting him in the hospital, she 'saw his hair erupt from the wood in [her] hands, a volcanic tangle of encrusted fire' (28). Inspired, she images a sculpture depicting 'the brilliance of hair dissolving in flame, that ephemeral moment when light became fire' (45). But walking home from the hospital she wonders:

How could I recreate the process of burning? Not the burned, an implosion of ash and blackness collapsing upon itself, but an explosion of light that transformed one form to another, that brilliant destruction of illusion by illusion which was in itself a heavenly creation of the new. (28)

Such musings reiterate the question of how to create movement using the permanent form of wood and words. She has 'a vision of hair burning like a bush for Moses in the wilderness. Fire that was not fire but light, so incandescent that it both consumed and created. Maybe,' she fears, 'the tangible made the creation of such visions impossible' (30). 'Again' thinking of John/Helios – 'his hair that brilliant conflagration of light and heat which defied tactile form' – Miranda wonders, 'How to create an intangible as a tangible: how to create what was light and movement and constant change in material fixed and unchangeable?' (39).

The layering of meaning around John/Helios's body is compounded by the association Miranda draws between his body and Christ's, and implicitly her emphasis on finding a stable yet fluid artistic medium is contrasted with her husband Alfred's rigid interpretation of the scriptures and Christ's role. Sculptures of both John/Helios and Jesus Christ are aligned with tree roots. Miranda carves John/Helios's body from 'part of a root system. The tangle of dried roots meshed like wild hair' (66), while in church she perceives the 'body of Christ elongated on the cross ... like a tree root, twisting downwards through the floor of the earth which suddenly became a roof over vast empty spaces' (76).

8 Even the name I am using for this character evinces the novel's preoccupation with the instability of meaning. As he has no memory of his own name Miranda calls the man Helios, a reference to the Sun God and to her perception of his body (and particularly his hair) in terms of light and fire. In contrast, Miranda's husband Alfred calls him John. Having 'in mind the youngest disciple' (50), Alfred correspondingly imagines himself as Christ.

Paradoxically roots are associated with movement and fluidity: with Miranda's longing to melt metal in the forge until 'it writhed out of my hand like tree roots' (47), or with her perception of a ti-tree's 'roots ... twisted in a dance as mad as matter dissolving in fire' (38–39). This privileging of movement and change is perpetuated in Miranda's description of Christ's body transforming from a tree root to a vine, to a butterfly and then to a mortal man:

His feet twined together like a thick vine and the crown on his head darted harsh thorns in the air. His rib cage strained outward from the breastbone like the wings of a butterfly stretched from the thorax. They looked fragile as if at any moment they might wrench free leaving His body a soft pulsating heart; not the kind pink little heart haloed in the breast of Catholic paintings, but an agonised organ bruised, exposed and struggling to survive without a body. (77)

Yet as well as being associated with fluidity and corporeality, Christ – and by association, John/Helios – is aligned with disembodiment and stasis through Miranda's earlier perception of the crucified figure as the 'dangling Christ space-walking and lost forever to humanity' (76).

It is notable that a fictional text should be so overtly concerned with questions and processes of interpretation, particularly given that realist novels which seek to downplay an engagement with these problems are consistently validated, critically as well as within the popular sphere. But Scarfe's engagement with reading as a performative practice is more explicitly political and, particularly, more overtly feminist than the analysis presented so far might suggest. Specifically, through the depiction of women's engagements with Miranda's sculpture of John/Helios, Scarfe both represents and creates a feminist reading community. In his recent book, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Ben Knights considers not only the representation of masculinities, but the ways in which certain literary texts are addressed 'not to a supposed universality of reading experience but specifically to the masculine' (8). Knights argues that such texts operate 'performatively', that is, the masculinities they depict are 'productive in giving rise to renewed performances of themselves' (3). *Miranda* also functions as a performative text, but far more self-consciously and explicitly than the fictions Knights analyses. By evoking an interpretive feminist community at both an intra- and an extra-textual level, I want to argue that Scarfe's novel explicitly addresses itself to women readers. Produced in relation to Miranda's sculpting, these communities represent a continuance and extension of the underlying concern in Scarfe's narrative with the nature of reading and interpretation.

Explicitly male-dominated and patriarchal, the society depicted in *Miranda* operates according to a 'hierarchy of obedience', 'children to parents, wives to husbands, husbands to God' (76). Yet with a God 'lost forever to humanity' (76), men have usurped His position, transforming this hierarchy into one in which they have complete control over women and children, and are obedient only to themselves. While depicted in various forms, women's consequently unequal and oppressed position is particularly evident in Miranda's relationship with Alfred. Or as she says, 'There had never been a relationship' (153). When

her mother dies, her father orders Miranda to marry Alfred 'because he would not support me any longer' (51). In accordance with Gayle Rubin's famous anthropological discussion of patriarchal societies, Miranda is positioned as an object exchanged between, and a conduit among, men. Against this explicitly hostile and oppressive patriarchal backdrop, Miranda's sculpture of John/Helios provides the impetus for the creation of a separate and subversive feminist community, centring on a women's art show.

Miranda contributes her sculpture to this show, along with the knitting, embroidery and craft pieces of the other women. Designed to raise money for the church hospital, the art show occurs within the confines of the patriarchal society, with women fulfilling their expected roles as supporters and carers rather than agents and leaders. Yet before the works are shown to the general public, the women are permitted a private exhibition. When her sculpture is unveiled, the women, normally silent except when voicing the opinions of their husbands, interpret and discuss Miranda's sculpture in a way that both echoes and exceeds her own – and the readers' – perceptions of John/Helios's body, and her attempts to represent her complex response to it.

'It's a man.'

'No, it's not, it's a woman.'

'A woman? Don't be silly. Women don't have ...'

'A man with a ...'

'A woman with breasts.'

... 'Just like my little boy when I bath him. So soft, like a tiny mushroom. Men don't know we know.'

'How clever of you, Miranda. It's a woman nursing her baby boy, both in the same body.'

... 'How clever of you, Miranda. You've never been a mother. How did you know?' (119–20)

As this conversation demonstrates, all the women perceive and interpret Miranda's sculpture in different ways, bringing their own experiences and history to it. At first Miranda is angry, believing that, as the artist, she has the right to define what people see in her work. However, her anger (which can be viewed as a foil, used to demonstrate the reasons for her subsequent acceptance) quickly dissipates when she realises that their interpretations are also valid: 'I nearly said, "It's not about mothering," but stopped. Maybe it was. It certainly was to these women. I had wanted it taken seriously. They had done this but on their terms' (121). In the reception of Miranda's sculpture, the novel endorses the possibility that artistic works will be responded to in ways that their creator did not anticipate, and does not approve of.

Although viewing Miranda's sculpture forges the women of the community into a collective, they decide, at her behest, that it should not be shown to the rest of the community:

'Men don't know what we know about life.'

... 'They wouldn't understand. So limited, poor things.'

'To need to be protected from life.' They laughed together, looking at each other.

'Husbands think that we need that, and they never even see a birth. Poor things, so

limited. Like children who think they know everything until they grow up. It's our secret.'

... Reverently they took *Helios* from the table, wrapped it in cloths and handed it to me like priestesses of the temple offering the contents of the sacred basket. 'Take it home, Miranda,' they said, 'but we'll remember.' (120–21)

Reflecting on the ways in which these women define the world on their own terms, and are painfully aware of the need to conceal these interpretations and responses from the men in the community, Miranda imagines sculpting 'a crowd of secret women's faces just emerging from a matrix of wood or stone surprised by their own temerity in daring to look' (124). The image precisely captures both the dynamics and the tentativeness of (responses to) art – ostensibly sculpture, but implicitly women's writing – that the novel attempts to thematise.

In the sculpting of John/Helios's body, Miranda produces a material image of her own perceptions, one that both resonates with and differs from the experiences of the women at the art show. Her work of art, and the women's responses to it, are sufficient to produce, at least temporarily, what Miranda later describes as 'sisterhood' (134). In turn, the representation of the production of this community of women provides a model for understanding the way in which the text addresses itself specifically to the creation of a feminist reading; in doing so, it implicitly produces a feminist community *for*, and not just in, the text. One of the chief ways it does this is through humour, particularly Miranda's mockery of Alfred. For instance, Miranda describes her husband 'as attenuated as a Byzantine saint, and he wears the same perpetual expression of sad righteousness. He is as if someone had stuck a straw down through his head and sucked out all the juice' (14). Later, she describes him as a turkey: 'He bristled and strutted and puffed and if he had not been so thin would have looked quite fattened with indignation' (80). Miranda extends such mockery to men as a whole when she describes their claims of land ownership as akin to 'dogs lift[ing] their legs around the circumference of their territory' (2).

For the reader to join in Miranda's laughter at these images of Alfred, the production of specifically feminist meanings is presumably necessary. The shared laughter that results produces a feminist community through what Kathleen Rowe describes as the acknowledgement of 'mutual and often forbidden [feminist] identifications' (18) that laughter among women permits. Both within and beyond the text, the reader's laughter undermines the seriousness of enactments of masculinity like Alfred's, as well as the authority men consequently accrue. Accordingly, the description of the women at the art show as they 'circled' the sculpture, 'touching, laughing, wondering, asserting, arguing' (120), emerges as a model for, and celebration of, the engagement with the text Scarfe intends for her readers, readers who, in turn, would be receptive to the fictions she writes. But the community of women imagined within *Miranda* is reinforced negatively as well as positively, and the novel ultimately emphasises the danger which such apparently celebratory works of art can occasion.

When one of the women tells her husband about the sculpture of John/Helios, Miranda is threatened with imprisonment in a psychiatric hospital. Significantly, this place is described as one where patients are

... stolen away from the light and the sun, deprived of choice, of power, of creativity, condemned for ever to a place where dreams were chained to impotence. There I would be entombed in stone and silence. Not the sculptor any longer but the face imprisoned in the matrix, never to be released. (157)

A suppression of women's creativity and interpretative freedom is thus presented as a real consequence of women's position within patriarchal society – and tellingly, it is an oppression in which other women are repeatedly shown to be complicit. In turn, given Scarfe's reflection in interview on her marginal position in relation to Australian writing, this representation of the suppression of creativity might also be taken as an expression of her own dissatisfaction at being overlooked by Australian critics generally, and perhaps feminist critics in particular. 'Sisterhood,' Miranda laments, 'was an illusion and would remain so until we both shared a shipwreck or until we both recognised that life for us was a continual shipwreck' (163).

The shipwreck to which Miranda refers occurs between Tom and Joe. As Joe tells Miranda, they were 'shipwrecked together off the coast of England. Clung to a spar for twelve hours. That creates brotherhood' (110). When Joe tells Miranda this story, she replies that '[w]omen aren't so lucky ... to have chances of brotherhood. Women are always on the edge Men won't let us in. It's not safe' (110). Yet at the same time as the allegory of the shipwreck signifies the exclusion of the women at the art show from the community at large (and potentially, Scarfe's marginality within the field of Australian fiction), it offers a utopian metaphor for the possibilities enabled through the communities created in and by *Miranda*. Fleeing to the lighthouse to escape the 'madhouse', Miranda says to Tom,

'I didn't have to be shipwrecked with you, Tom, did I?' And shyly, 'We've always been brothers.'

'Yes, Miranda, yes.' He patted me on the shoulder. 'Always brothers, my dear. Or sisters, if you prefer.' (168)

Thus, community – Miranda and Tom's brotherhood-sisterhood – emerges not as biological or essential grouping, but as an alliance arising from an acknowledgement of common difference and difficulty. And crucially, one of the elements of Miranda's mooted escape from the town, with Joe, is that Joe has promised to facilitate her sculpting when they get to America.

In offering a fable about the ruthless restrictions produced by a misogynist community, eager to control and even prevent women's creativity and communication with each other, and the simultaneous possibilities for identification and understanding such things offer, Scarfe's metaphor of the shipwreck can be read as her longing for a world in which the 'difference' of her fictions resonates with the experiences, and produces a community, of its readers. Inherent in the privileging of multiplicity and contingency in *Miranda*,

and in the portrayal of Miranda and Tom's brotherhood/sisterhood, is the acknowledgement that these experiences may take many forms and encompass many different types of people. Yet if critical readings of contemporary Australian fiction are to extend beyond the current conversations about women's writing, it is vital that the 'difference' offered by authors like Scarfe is read and discussed.

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