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Written by

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In the Same Boat

AUSTRALIAN FICTION **FEATURES**

Discussions of the cultural cringe are now conducted in the past tense. Cringe-thinking, or so the contemporary narrative goes, can no longer function in a globalised, cosmopolitan, multicultural Australia where local literature circulates in an international milieu. This new literary internationalism is perhaps best exemplified by the designation of Melbourne as an UNESCO City of Literature in the 2008 and the subsequent founding of the Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas, but evidence of Australian cultural bodies' increasing collaboration with foreign organisations can be found everywhere: the establishment of the 2012

conference NonfictionNow, which was a joint initiative of RMIT and the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop; the 2010 creation of if:book Australia, a collaborative venture between the Queensland Writers Centre and the international Institute for the Future of the Book; the 2012 recognition of Clunes as one of sixteen members of the International Organisation of Booktowns; Allen & Unwin's 2010 launch of an Australian version of the Faber Academy, which offers creative writing classes; and the recent announcement of a Melbourne chapter of Alain de Botton's School of Life, which will host literary events, offer 'bibliotherapy', and contain a bookshop run by local seller Readings.

In addition to hosting such major international authors as Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Bret Easton Ellis and Margaret Atwood, local literary festivals have sought to bolster their international reach in various ways. In 2012, the Melbourne Writers Festival ran events featuring nearly the entire editorial staff of the *New Yorker*. The Sydney Writers Festival's new director, Jemma Birrell, seems to have been selected largely for her international experience as 'the events director of the legendary Shakespeare and Company bookshop in Paris'. Even literary magazines have gotten into the act. The *Lifted Brow* has published new work from such international authors as Tao Lin, Sam Lipsyte, Sheila Heti, Jim Shepard, Blake Butler and Benjamin Kunkel, and *Higher Arc* magazine appeared at last year's Brooklyn Book Festival. The U.S. magazine *McSweeney's* recently published an issue dedicated to Australian Aboriginal fiction, and U.S. actor James Franco wrote the featured story from last year's fiction edition of the *Big Issue*. On top of this, large numbers of authors undertake fellowships, grants, exchanges and tertiary study at foreign institutions, and send their work to overseas publishers of books and magazines.

In light of these circumstances, a chorus of authors, critics and pundits have pronounced the cringe dead. Author Susan Johnson argues that, for her sons' generation 'the cultural cringe has disappeared, and for them questioning the differences between London, New York and Melbourne has no relevance or resonance at all.' Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, in their survey of contemporary Australian literature, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (2009), depict Australia as 'a place that is now seen, not as riven by cultural cringe, but as enabled by cultural incorporation'. Graham Huggan baldly states that 'The much agonized-over "cultural cringe" is now considered by most Australians to be an

irrelevant issue, although it still resurfaces from time to time in local debates over national core culture.'

In what comprises the most emphatic obituary for the cringe, Nick Bryant, in a 2012 *Griffith Review* article, argues that the cringe cannot function in a country that *exports* so many of its cultural producers: 'To use an unlovely phrase heard more commonly in diplomatic and sporting circles, Australia is punching above its weight in the arts and culture.' In support of this position, Bryant compiles a long list of various actors and artists who have achieved success overseas.

There is a certain truth – perhaps even a 'truthiness' – to some of these claims. The cringe, in its original form, was a product of colonialism. In the literary sphere, British publishers dominated the Australian book market from the late nineteenth century until the 1980s. Authors' hopes for publication and financial success rested in the hands of London publishers or their local representatives. This was a form of a cultural imperialism. Local works of art depended on recognition by foreign intermediaries, a situation described by Henry Lawson:

As soon as the Southern writer goes 'home' and gets some recognition in England, he is 'So-and-So, the well-known Australian author whose work has attracted so much attention in London lately'; and we first hear of him by cable, even though he might have been writing at his best for ten years in Australia.

As A.A. Phillips pointed out in his seminal 1950 essay, the cultural cringe was ultimately the *internalisation* of Britain's colonial hegemony: 'in the back of the Australian mind, there sits a minatory Englishman ... that Public School Englishman with his detection of a bad smell permanently engraved on his features ... whose indifference to the Commonwealth is not even studied.' Britain's material dominion over Australian culture manifested itself as a socio-psychological inferiority complex, a national will to fail that became a self-fulfilling prophecy, stymieing Australia's attempts to forge a national culture.

But Australia, or so we are told, is postcolonial now. Despite many starts and stops,

the broader project of Australian cultural nationalism – which was made explicit with the founding of the Australia Council in 1973 – has been underway for decades. Recent public disputes over the alleged ‘disappearance’ of Australian classics from university classrooms have, ironically, proved that readers’ interest in the national literature is as strong as ever. Not only, as Gelder pointed out, is Australian Literature being ‘taught in more than 300 subjects in about 40 tertiary institutions’; several publishers – including Text, Allen & Unwin and Harper Collins – have begun reprinting classic Australian literary works. As social psychologist Norman Feather demonstrated in the 1990s, Australians are now actually biased *towards* Australian cultural products, rather than suspicious of them. It certainly no longer seems plausible to claim, as Phillips did, that Australians have an internalised upper-class Englishman lurking in their superegos.

Have Australians overcome the cultural cringe and learned, as Phillips hoped they would, ‘the art of being unselfconsciously ourselves’? I am less sanguine about rumours of cringe’s demise. My suggestion is that the contemporary cultural cringe can only be understood in relation to the transformation of the Australian cultural milieu, which now operates within a diffuse, neo-imperial (or post-colonial), globally networked cultural economy. I think an example of how the cringe currently operates can be found by examining an increasingly marginal – if symbolically important – cultural form: the single-author short story collection.

While the short story may seem an unlikely barometer of cultural change, it is a form that has held a culturally privileged place in Australian letters. The work of short story writers such as Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton has profoundly shaped how Australia conceives of its national character. Moreover, while the production of novels is still subject to the commercial imperative of profit, single-author short story collections are almost uniformly viewed by publishers as unprofitable. As a result, such collections are affected by swings in symbolic or cultural capital, and the market for them has accordingly proven far more volatile than for other forms of fiction. These swings in popularity provide a singular insight into how Australians value their literary culture.

The 1970s and ’80s saw the rise of a ‘new wave’ of Australian short story writers –

Murray Bail, Helen Garner, Peter Carey, Frank Moorhouse and Robert Drewe, among many others – who revitalised the form. If this was the apex of the Australian short story’s cultural influence, as is commonly accepted, then the early 2000s were its nadir. From 2000 to 2006, single-author short story collections virtually disappeared from the Australian literary marketplace, unless, as Gelder and Salzman noted, they were written by ‘novelists with high public profiles and (one assumes) guaranteed sales.’ Indeed, most of the notable short story collections produced in this period – Tim Winton’s *The Turning* (2004), Gillian Mears’ *A Map of Gardens* (2002), Mandy Sayer’s *15 Kinds of Desire* (2001) and Eva Hornung’s *Majar* (2003)—were written by relatively established authors who had already published novels and had either won or been shortlisted for major literary awards. Emerging authors who concentrated on short fiction could not expect to publish their work in book form, even if they had published extensively in magazines and had won multiple prizes.

From the perspective of 2013, this situation seems unimaginable. There has been such a resurgence of the form over the last six years or so, that one can almost speak of a *glut* of short story collections – including books by such authors as Ryan O’Neill, Amanda Lohrey, Tim Richards, Paddy O’Reilly, Josephine Rowe, Jennifer Mills, Tom Cho, Jess Huon, Patrick Cullen, Steven Amsterdam, Tony Birch, Chris Sommerville, James Roy, Amanda Curtin, A.S. Patric, Wayne Macauley, Anson Cameron, Andy Kissane, Catherine Harris, Cameron Raynes, Janette Turner Hospital, and many others. Another ten single-authored volumes have been produced by two sustained attempts to revive the popularity of short story collections. The first of these, Affirm Press’s ‘Long Story Shorts’ series, was started in 2010 and produced six single-authored collections (including my own) over about 18 months. The second, the creation of the publisher Spineless Wonders, has so far produced four works by single authors and two anthologies. Many of these are the work of debut authors. It is worth noting, however, that virtually all of these books have been produced by small and mid-sized independent publishers, rather than large, multinational corporations.

As book reviewer Jo Case noted in 2010, this renaissance of short fiction publishing can be attributed to the publication of two breakout collections:

Short stories are newly fashionable in Australian publishing. Arguably, it began with the success of Cate Kennedy's *Dark Roots* in 2006, proving it was possible to become a household name on the back of stories – and paving the way for Nam Le's international bestseller, *The Boat*, two years later. This year has seen a comparative flood in locally published collections.

It is worth emphasising that many of these subsequent works were written *before* the publication of Le and Kennedy's stories, and thus the current 'glut' represents a backlog of work that had been previously deemed commercially unviable. Wayne Macauley's *Other Stories* (2010), for example, includes many stories more than a decade old and one that dates back to 1993. Nevertheless, within the publishing industry, there is a sense that Le's and Kennedy's collections marked a turning point for Australian short fiction.

But how did Le and Kennedy's collections break through publishers' and readers' general lack of interest in short fiction in the early twenty-first century? And why do these two collections continue to hold a privileged place, despite the appearance of dozens of other short story collections over the last several years? Why have these been deemed the 'best' examples of the contemporary Australian short story?

In a sense, the success of these books is somewhat surprising. Though both Le's and Kennedy's stories are well-wrought, displaying all of the careful craft that institutionalised forms of creative writing aspire to, there is something deeply conservative about the aesthetics of both books, which seem happy to work within the confines of well-established traditions, rather than trying to expand or exceed them. Both may have been breakout successes, but there is little about either work that can be considered legitimately groundbreaking. I want to suggest, instead, that the Australian reception of Kennedy and Le's books – as reflected in both reviews and profile pieces – was profoundly and positively influenced by overseas responses to their work. My point here is that, whatever one thinks of their literary merit, both the material success of these books and the effusive critical praise that has been heaped upon them have been dramatically influenced by their international reception.

On the face of it, this claim may seem dubious in Kennedy's case. Prior to the

publication of *Dark Roots*, she had established herself as a prominent Australian short story writer by winning a variety of regional and national competitions, including the Age Short Story Award in consecutive years (2000 and 2001) – a fact often noted in reviews. This, in and of itself, is interesting, in that it testifies to the increasing role that literary prizes of various kinds play in affecting the reception of authors, though this is beyond the scope of this essay. But the turning point for Kennedy's Australian reception came when – just prior to the release of *Dark Roots* – she had a story, 'Black Ice', published in the *New Yorker*.

After the publication of her story in this prestigious overseas magazine, Kennedy was no longer simply a promising Australian author, but an internationally recognised one. This fact was seized upon by the media when her book was released. Nowhere is this better articulated than in a profile of Kennedy from 16 September 2006 written by Jane Sullivan:

This year is surely the time and place for Kennedy, who is possibly the most successful short-fiction writer in Australia, if you judge success by prizes and places in anthologies. But it's taken 14 years of steady writing to reach the point where she can see her fiction in the *New Yorker* and in her own book: her first short story collection, *Dark Roots*.

It's notable that *The New Yorker* gets top billing here, and Kennedy's book is mentioned almost as an afterthought. The implication – and it is repeated across virtually all of the media around Kennedy's book – is clear. Local accolades are all well and good, but publication in the *New Yorker* sits on another level. As Frank Moorhouse once quipped, *Meanjin* is an Aboriginal word meaning 'rejected from the *New Yorker*'.

Six years later, in a 2012 interview with the Wheeler Centre, Kennedy was asked to name 'the most significant moment in [her] writing career.' Perhaps inevitably, she listed publication in the *New Yorker* as her defining achievement: 'it hit me that an editor at the *New Yorker* was sitting up at 10.30 at night their time, devoting time to a story of mine, and soon it would be in the actual magazine ... the shock came home to

me then. Literally [*sic*].’ Kennedy’s excitement is, on one level, understandable; on another level, there is something depressing about the fact that Kennedy views the publication of a *single story* in a U.S. magazine as being more important than any of the five books she has published or the many Australian awards she has won. Would a U.S. or U.K. author of Kennedy’s stature view publication in the *New Yorker* in the same way?

If Kennedy’s comparatively modest success overseas (and let’s remember that the *New Yorker* publishes fiction in all of its 47 annual issues) could so drastically affect her Australian reception, it is hardly surprising that Nam Le’s multiple overseas successes were prominently mentioned in virtually every Australian review of *The Boat*. James Ley addresses the issue in the first sentence of his *Age* review, noting that Le ‘lives in the United States where he has attended the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop’. Nathanael O’Reilly’s review for *Antipodes* frames Le’s book in similar terms: ‘*The Boat*, Nam Le’s remarkable debut collection of stories, has deservedly garnered a plethora of glowing reviews from around the globe for the young Vietnamese-Australian author.’ A 2009 profile in the *Age* opens by listing all of Le’s overseas accolades, as if summarising his *curriculum vitae*:

At just 30, Vietnam-born, Melbourne-raised writer Nam Le has been blessed with early success. *The Boat*, his debut collection of short stories, was published last year to a wave of international critical acclaim. In addition, Le has been awarded several major awards, including the Dylan Thomas Prize – the richest in Britain. Furthermore, he is the fiction editor of the *Harvard Review*.

It’s worth emphasising the force that this kind of framing exerts on Australian reviews. Overseas success immediately increases the visibility of Australian books. Most short story collections are lucky to receive lengthy reviews in *any* major news outlet; *The Boat* received extended reviews in virtually every Australian publication that normally reviews books and many that don’t. Moreover, foreign accolades – especially in the case of Le, who had already been reviewed favourably *twice* in the *New York Times* – almost inevitably lead to glowing Australian notices. Any reviewer offering a negative assessment of *The Boat* would effectively be questioning the

legitimacy of such august overseas institutions as the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Harvard University, and the *New York Times*.

The Australian reception of *The Boat* was almost unanimous in its glowing praise – an extremely unusual state of affairs. One of the few reviewers to offer even faint criticism of Le's work was James Ley who, despite offering a favourable assessment of *The Boat*, noted that Le's stories are 'polished to a point where any barb of originality has been sanded away'. It is interesting to contrast Le's reception with Kennedy's in this instance. Although Kennedy had received many prizes within Australia, her overseas reputation was not as well-established and reviews of her work in Australia were far more varied. Although *Dark Roots* has taken on the status of a contemporary classic, many reviewers were openly critical of her work. Delia Falconer's review in the *Australian Book Review*, for example, ended by noting that 'While Kennedy's stories pay brief, clear-eyed attention to ordinary moments of potential poetry, they seem, taken together, to be missing the messiness, verve and veering joy that are part of life.'

Reviews of Le's work also differed in that they explicitly foregrounded a set of biographical details that made him an exemplary representative of contemporary Australia. The first line of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* review of *The Boat* makes this clear: 'Nam Le was born in Vietnam, grew up in Melbourne and is making a name for himself in the US.' Almost every review of *The Boat* refers to Le's multiple nationalities, positioning him as a representative of a cosmopolitan, multicultural and globalised Australia. Of course, there are good textual imperatives for reviewers to mention these issues, not only because *The Boat* explicitly sets its stories in various locations around the globe, but also because Le both makes explicit and ironises his own position in the collection's now famous opening story 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice', which features an Australian writer named Nam Le who is studying at the University of Iowa and is nervous about being pegged as an author of so-called 'Ethnic Literature'.

But the fact that Le self-reflexively ironises his position does not change it. And in many ways Le's deft use of self-deprecating humour draws attention away from the reality of the very strange space he occupies as a cultural figure. I make no claim here to know anything about Le as a person; I am commenting only on his public persona. On the one hand, he is an exemplar of a transnational, cosmopolitan

creative class that seems to transgress traditional national, ethnic and racial categories. On the other hand, Le is a figure of the establishment, whose achievements have been consecrated and authorised by a series of elite international institutions that possess significant stores of cultural capital, such as the University of Iowa, Harvard, and the *New York Times*. Le, at least as a cultural figure, is able to have it both ways, simultaneously representing the margin and the centre, the local and global, the new transnational creative class and the traditional institutional centres of cultural capital, by combining his ambition with an ironic self-effacement that seems quintessentially Australian.

The paradoxical cultural position that Le occupies demonstrates how the contemporary cultural cringe operates. In its current form, the cringe does not mean that Australians openly disparage their own culture, but rather that more value and prestige attaches to those Australian cultural products which have been validated by well-respected overseas institutions with high reserves of symbolic capital. Put simply, a book that has overseas impact (to use the fashionable academic term) means more than a book that has a purely local impact. This is the form of the new cringe.

One of the cultural cringe's defining features, according to Phillips, was that Australians did not trust their own aesthetic judgment. The new cringe continues this pattern by relying on international reception (particularly in Western, English-speaking countries) to consecrate Australian artists – a tendency that Henry Lawson observed a century ago. In this sense, Nick Bryant's article, which highlights the overseas success of contemporary Australian artists, is actually a product of the contemporary cultural cringe that seeks to value Australian cultural products in the mirror of a global marketplace. The result of the new cringe, as current Emerging Writers Festival director Sam Twyford-Moore noted in an article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, is that young Australian writers are going overseas

to, effectively, legitimize their practice. An artist friend of mine said that he was getting calls from galleries and curators only once his plane took off from Sydney en route to Berlin – that he had somehow showed some extra commitment by relocating, even though his work had not necessarily changed in shape nor form.

What concerns me about this process is not that the new cringe threatens our national literature – indeed, quite the opposite. As Sylvia Lawson argued in *The Archibald Paradox* (1983), Australian nationalism is actually inseparable from the kind of thinking that resulted in the cringe, since the two form ‘the paradox of being colonial’, in which one must ‘know enough of the metropolitan world’ to ‘move and think internationally’, while resisting internationalism ‘strongly enough for the colony to cease to be colonial and become its own place’. I would argue that Le has been so readily adopted as a figure of literary nationalism *precisely because* he is an international figure, who is both local *and* foreign, cosmopolitan but still recognisably Australian, as evidenced in both his self-deprecating humour and his note-perfect imitation of Tim Winton in ‘Halflead Bay’. Here Australia’s perception of itself as a globally-aware, cosmopolitan nation paradoxically forms the grounds of a new discourse of Australian nationalism.

My concern with the new cringe lies in its potential to result in a levelling of culture. Here, the *style* of both Le’s and Kennedy’s work is crucial. Both are practitioners of an over-refined style of writing that, for better or worse, has traditionally been associated with U.S. Creative Writing programs. While I don’t mean this as quite the value judgment that it might appear to be, I think it is both accurate and fair to describe Le and Kennedy’s work as part of what is effectively a contemporary academicism (which I mean in the sense of academic painting) that privileges a certain kind of ‘polished’ writing, and which seeks to present a smooth and unbroken illusion of presence. While such writing may take up one set of Modernist literary techniques (such as parataxis, the objective correlative, the epiphany), it avoids those techniques frequently associated with the avant-garde (such as metonymy, intellectual montage, artificial constraint and other conceptual approaches), which would threaten to undermine this carefully constructed impression of textual unity. Rather than aiming for aesthetic originality, novelty, shock, or defamiliarisation, contemporary academicism seeks to reproduce or refine its specific style, which is ultimately an ahistorical simulacrum derived from a selective and simplistic reading of a much more complicated and fraught literary tradition.

Kennedy’s writing tends towards minimal realism, while Le’s writing self-consciously inhabits a series of different genres (a fact that is ironically noted in *The Boat*, in which it is stated that the fictional Nam Le prefers ‘to write about lesbian

vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans – and New York painters with haemorrhoids’). But both authors approach their work from within the framework of this academicism. Le has frequently been praised – by Michiko Kakutani, among others – for his ‘ventriloquism’, his ability to *emulate* other styles, although Le has, again, ironised this descriptor in a self-effacing and sarcastic talk called ‘On Ventriloquism’. But while his ventriloquism is impressive, Le’s stories often feel like a set of genre exercises that precisely imitate their sources without transcending them. I once heard an offhand critique of *The Boat* that more or less sums up its flaws in one line: ‘that book is the work of an A student.’ Kennedy’s work fits even more explicitly into a tradition of U.S. minimalist realism, whose avatars are writers like Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver and Grace Paley. In her review of *Dark Roots*, Delia Falconer notes the influence of these academic conceptions of creative writing on Kennedy’s work, suggesting that she has ‘an almost American sensibility’ even if she ‘avoids the length of exposition that distinguishes much of the contemporary short fiction coming out of places such as the Iowa Writers’ Workshop’. In both cases, the authors display a scholastic and ultimately uncritical reverence for this tradition. While their writing is possessed of an undeniable skill and artanship, their stories – however beautifully crafted – rarely rise above pastiche.

The dominance of this new academicism – which threatens to become *the* international style of short fiction writing – is occurring at precisely the moment when writers with other kinds of aesthetic goals are struggling to find readers. Giramondo publisher, Ivor Indyk, recently raised precisely this question: ‘How much more difficult is it then for young writers working in an expressive or poetic mode, especially when they are writing from traditions that place a high value on richness of voice and the embellishments of metaphor?’ Such authors will face increasing difficulty in a literary marketplace that expects fiction to be made to specification, so that it can be exported as easily as Ikea flat-packed furniture. Writers now face two equally unappealing choices: they must either conform to the international style in the hope of accessing a broader readership, or else remain true to their aesthetic convictions and risk relegating their work to obscurity.

One of the virtues, or so it seems to me, of the ‘hive of activity’ around short story writing in Australia during the 1970s and ’80s was that it reflected the interests of a new generation of readers, resulting in stories that were formally experimental

while representing an increasing diversity of viewpoints and speaking positions. While I do not want to fall into a trap of lionising a specific period in history and am well aware that the past is no panacea, it strikes me that a comparison between the two 'waves' of short fiction raises some essential questions: What if Australia's cultural transnationalism and cosmopolitanism results not in a new diversity, but a new homogenisation? What if measuring Australian writing in the mirror of global culture means that we only get back a reflection of *other* already established traditions? And what if books that don't adhere to the specifications of an approved style face the prospect of being ignored by audiences altogether, resulting in what Wyndham Lewis once described as the 'discouragement of too much unconservative originality'?

[Read the 'In the Same Boat' correspondence.](#)

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