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AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

NOVEMBER 1989



**BARBARA
HANRAHAN**

- ROBERT DREWE
- PETER GOLDSWORTHY
- SUSAN HAMPTON



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The pleasure of exertion

Rosemary Sorensen

Ania Walwicz

Boat

Angus & Robertson/Sirius,

266pp, \$12.99pb

0-207-16296-4

THE KIND of writing that is to be found in Ania Walwicz's collection *Boat* is the kind that angers many people. Eschewing punctuation as benevolent and therefore inferior signposts to meaning, Walwicz's prose is uncompromisingly difficult. Plot is virtually absent. Syntax defies convention. The ugly, both visually and verbally, is preferred to the beautiful.

Her tradition is that of dadaism and the Surrealists, which in effect dates this vigorous and rigorous prose. The avant-garde experimentations of Tristan Tzara's clique and later the more committed (and ultimately more conformist) band clustered around Breton were defiant reactions and such bursts of energy are hard to sustain. In the case of the more organised Surrealist movement, the efforts to sustain it showed up most painfully the inherent anomalies in an anarchic movement which seeks to impose its own rules. There was a bizarre streak of conservatism running through even the wicked arrogance of Tzara. As for Breton, an example like his fantastically self-indulgent *Nadja*, a story purporting to be that of a mysteriously brilliant woman but really the narcissistic story of Breton's own fun and games experimentation with the unconscious, suffices to reveal his *marvaise foi*.

And so, when Walwicz claims allegiance with such dubious, if brilliant, forefathers, there is cause for caution. However, it is clearly to the tradition of so-called automatic writing that she is turning as well as



Ania Walwicz

to the fascination with both the speech patterns of children and the language of dreams. And there is still, after more than half a century of experimentation and discussion of such language, much to be learnt. In *Boat*, Ania Walwicz guides us a little closer to learning about the deceits and surprises of language.

The cover blurb gives us the author's own quest principles: to mould personal history into fundamental rhythms of language, to deliberately lay open the processes of thought and feeling, to challenge prevailing perceptions. She often does a lot less than this, which is not surprising as she is a writer who is taking on the whole universe, keen to orchestrate a new, fabulous Babel — Babel wasn't built in a day. For some of the one hundred pieces the gaps in information are so wide that only Ania Walwicz, taking great run-ups and pole-vaulting on her own history, can make it.

This can be frustrating. It's all very well to demand an effort of the reader, pointing out, in the process, how little effort is required and what ignominious plots can be hatched while the reader lolls passively before an undemanding text. And yet,

the great days of limited publishing are well and truly over, at least for a while, so that to expect the kind of devotion it requires to crack some of the puzzles presented by the prose in *Boat* is perhaps expecting more than a fair share of the reader's attention. If, as the book's blurb suggests, the one hundred parts of this spectacular whole are all intricately woven together, to be most effective the whole should be read without too many interruptions, from 'The Most Beautiful Girl in the World' to 'harbour'. Some may relish such discipline, but a meandering path through the book has the appeal of allowing the reader to feel that connections need not be constantly made. To get all that Walwicz is offering requires a huge effort. To get a part is delightfully accessible.

The parts I liked best are the ones which have the accelerating rhythm of an anarchic piece of clockwork, the kind that would defy entropy, the kind that sometimes writers of fairy tales are fascinated by, when the toy cannot wind down and dances on in a merrily frenetic way towards an exhilarating end. In the nightmare vision of 'wonderful' or the euphonic precision of 'buttons' such a spiralling of energy occurs — best read aloud to enjoy the quite physical pleasure that words employed in this way can bring. Some of the other pieces I'd prefer to hear Ania Walwicz read herself; hearing her read 'oolee', a remarkable, witty and inspired prose translation of a person's private discussion with a cat puts new meaning into the often quite tedious experience of listening to writer's read from their own work.

Only occasionally does my anger and impatience rise, when I cannot pick up the rhythms that are behind the voices:

that did not see apart only in what was with me to touch or what did to me you so very very lonely were all one year did not see outs why not come was scared of catching like hanging on threads about breaks so very sorry please forgive myself but yet all time just think abouts you and that returns to and that do so have what a left to be gone ways what . . .

The refusal to give any cues is certainly an integral part, but it is always frustrating to be left with insufficient information to find the cue yourself. Certainly, this is just as likely to signal a lack of the part of the reader and it's up to me therefore to decide whether I can live with my deficiency here.

But the keynote to the whole collection is humour. Beyond jokes and irony, the accelerating humour of a piece like 'playing' releases a pleasure in language which can only be liberating. It's the child's view without pretention and without insincerity (two things which dominated much Surrealist output) that gives the prose its zest:

in they come in don't step too near they get frightened my airport is waiting little fine made planes come in and land careful now they land they people step out carrying tiny ant suitcases they walk in they land in i made airport for them to come in they came in little plane finger flew in portholes windows seats inside get in and land now



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The Way My Father Tells It: The Story of an Australian Life

Tim Bowden

ABC, 276pp, \$29.95hb
0-642-12952-5

Reviewed by **Stephen Matchett**

SOMEWHERE IN the bowels of the Constitution mayhap there is a clause guaranteeing every Australian the right to have at least one book published. This would certainly account for the mass of memories and anecdotage issued annually by authors who cannot write and whose reminiscences add nothing to our knowledge of our country's past.

This book is not, happily, of this kind but through no fault of its narrator, John Bowden, it at times lurches perilously close to that appalling genre inaccurately referred to as family 'history'.

John Bowden is manifestly a fine man, a representative of an open, egalitarian Australia. The story of his life told through these edited transcripts (why only the name of his son, who edited them, appears on the jacket is a mystery) is not the stuff of high drama but is certainly entertaining. In essence Mr Bowden describes an Australia which, as his generation passes is leaving the realm of living memory and becoming history.

This is the central problem with the book; it is neither particularly good nor useful history. Mr Bowden is clearly an acute and intelligent gentleman. Yet his memories in themselves are insufficient to add to our understanding of his times.

This is not to dismiss Mr Bowden's book as being without merit in describing eighty-three years of Tasmanian life. His modest enthusiasm for the task ensures a narrative which is positively beguiling. His boyhood in an insular and culturally self-contained Hobart is particularly appealing. Those readers prepared to suspend belief in the universality of ennui will find the Tasmania of John Bowden's early years a delightful place indeed.

The function of social history is, however, to replicate and analyze culture and society as they change

through time and how they shape and are in turn shaped by the experience of individuals. Mr Bowden gives us the individual experience but only alludes in passing to the social and political forces which formed the culture in which he grew up.

And, while he describes the round of childhood life beautifully, he is less successful in dealing with his relationships with members of his family. His siblings remain shadowy figures, as does his mother, rendered silent from years of childbirth.

Nor does he place any great store on the meaning of his public life. He describes his survival in the Depression as a virtually self-educated auto electrician without any real detail on the impact of the crash on Tasmania. He similarly presents his service in World War II without analysis or complaint. Mr Bowden's war experiences appear to have been characterized by the long stretches of utterly useless time wasting which armies excel at inflicting.

His description of his own marriage and children, clearly the central experiences of his life, are far more animated. His coverage of his wife's long illness demonstrates a love and compassion which he probably would be embarrassed to have ascribed to him but which qualities he possesses in an admirable abundance.

Mr Bowden's book is essentially the narrative of a man who grew up in a happy family and whose principle delights have been the relationship with his wife and children. He is the ordinary bloke par excellence and demonstrates what, at best, a fine people his generation of Australians was. He is clearly a man who would probably have a great deal to say about the changes to Australian life and self-perception that he must have seen in his long life. Perhaps he was not asked the right questions.