

# Love, Lust, Life and LandSCape Writing About Brisbane in the Last Twenty Years

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Brisbane is the kind of city that if it did not exist would have to be invented -- and indeed it has by many of its writers. Its history of settlement and its political conservatism of the slash, bum and bulldoze variety has urged writers like Sam Watson in his novel *The Kadaitcha* Sung to depict it as a place of punishment, violence, racism and **red-necked** parochialism. The same sense of oppression informs David Malouf's **mixed** nostalgic references to the city as a place of beauty and boredom, **a city you can love and hate** in Johnno. In similar vein, Jessica Anderson in *Tirra Lirra by the River*, Angelika Fremd in *The Glass Inferno* and Janette Turner Hospital in both short stories and novels, depict Brisbane as a place one needs to leave **but** also **a** place where epiphanies are **possible**, and where the past haunts the **present with** a ferocious insistence. For novelists Rosie Scott, Janette Turner *Hospital* and Venero Armanno, Brisbane is simultaneously Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Many writers depict Brisbane as **a** great **place to grow up** in but you wouldn't **want** to live there — unless you are Hugh Lunn. Brisbane has been, and arguably **still** is by some writers, seen **both** favourably and unfavourably **as** a provincial backwater, unsophisticated and **straight** — still **a** frontier town **in the popular** and literary imagination **if not in reality**, **a** place where **it** is likely that you will know somebody who knows somebody you know. This is pointed out repeatedly by John Birmingham, author of the whimsical *He Died With a Felafel in his Hand*, by way of a distinguishing feature of flat life in Brisbane in contrast to other (Southern) capitals. In Brisbane, Birmingham writes;

Everyone's stories intersect, crossing **over and** through **each** other like sticky **strands of destiny** and **DNA**, (Birmingham, 42)

**A** contemporary **of** Birmingham's, Brisbane **born** novelist Susan Johnson also **refers to the big** country town intimacy of Brisbane in her 1987 novel *Messages from Chaos*. She writes **about** growing **up in** Brisbane in the **sixties** and seventies:

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Brisbane **was full of** gossip: I loved it and **hated it**. Living in Brisbane then gave you little choice about the **people you wanted to see**: it **was** inevitable that you'd **run** into them somewhere. This group intersected with **that** group and that **group** with this: they all intersected **at some point**. (Johnson, 25)

Brisbane writers in the seventies — Shapcott, Malouf, Hall, Rodriguez — often felt the **limitations of life in what was** regarded as the **intellectually** and politically impoverished North, fleeing Brisbane for less **tropical** but more creative climates in the South. Yet all of these writers shared an ambivalent **attitude** towards the city, and for all its perceived aridness, Brisbane and its environs was to generate a rich **panoply** of themes and **metaphors** in their writing. Thomas Shapcott's 1975 collection of poems *Shabbytown Calendar* **plunders the** lyric and sensuous possibilities of season, weather, climate, flora and fauna native to Queensland to celebrate its potential for renewal and rebirth as in this **endpiece** from 'December Fugue':

Day smells fruit turning brown with **ripe**  
sunburn oil and **peeling** shoulders  
December afterbreath of 5 o'clock thunderstorms  
leaves and growth departures and mildew stains  
December headshakes of **new** buds leaves branches  
waiting for the **afternoon** breeze  
waiting for you to move **for me to move**  
December rich with a year's compost  
deeper and shallow as words thrown **in** a dark room  
or silences thrown or **dark or storms exploring**  
December waiting for hands to **be** cool and gentle  
for **taste to be where we are**  
for us to be December or to be  
January to **be** fibrous with thunderstorms remnants of jungle **mango** weather  
(Shapcott, 104)

Someone has pointed out that Queensland, **and** particularly Brisbane **in** summer, is often evoked in **its** literature through **colour** and odour, **both of which** are associated with **sensuousness and** freedom. This is true of earlier **writing like** Shapcott's and **the** poetry of Rodriguez and continues **to be so** in **many recent** publications, Janette Turner Hospital **for example writes in** Charades:

Brisbane loomed ahead. There was never any mistaking the **smell of** that city, the way it came at you in a familiar wave of frangipani and jasmine and a yellow splash of allamander flowers. (Turner Hospital, 330)

David Malouf's novel *Johnno* also written in 1975 (it, was a very good year!) is often, acclaimed as one of the **first** groundbreaking pieces of writing (**perhaps** because it **was** a novel and not **poetry**) to provide an ideological underpinning to place and **perspective** — **in this** instance **growing up** in post-war Brisbane. Its

particular combination of nostalgia and reverence, frustration and repudiation, love and hate **for Brisbane** has I **think** provided a particular **method** of **imaginatively mapping** Brisbane that been quite influential.

The character of Johnno in that novel views Brisbane as the ‘arsehole of the **universe**’, **and** the narrator, Dante, although less hostile, is nevertheless just as frustrated with **life in** a soulless town where nothing happens.

**Brisbane** was nothing...a city that blew neither hot nor **cold**, **a place** where nothing happened and where nothing **would** ever **happen**, because it had no soul. People suffered here without **significance**. It **was** too mediocre even to be a province of **hell**. It would **have** defeated even Baudelaire. **A** place where poetry could **never** occur, (Malouf, 84)

Yet in **this** novel as **in** many other texts that construct a particular view of Brisbane and Queensland, the negativity about life **in** a sleepy **sub-tropical** town is **not** the total picture. The **formidable and** enigmatic Johnno is portrayed in an interesting and paradoxical **way** — a sensitive intellectual with a few **Aussie** rough edges — and **in some** ways the character Johnno symbolises the rough glamour of **a** town beginning to come to terms with its **own** metamorphosis and its **own** contradictions, at once ‘sprawlingly, slatternly unlovely’ and ‘almost beautiful’, **Some** twenty years **on** from *Johnno* Nick Earls wrote *Zig Zag Street*. The hero of this novel, Ricky, could be a latter day Johnno, although he takes **himself** somewhat less seriously, **and curiously, or perhaps** predictably, Brisbane is **still** regarded both as a place where nothing **happens** or where something **interesting** might just **happen** around the **next** corner, **In Zig Zag Street expectation** and anticipation **are** everything.

The sun is **setting** as I **walk** down the hill, a bottle of red **wine** in one hand, **and a** blue haze is settling over the **brewery and** Toowong and the west, Lights **are coming** an, **and there's** traffic blocking Milton Road **in** the distance **and** moving slowly along Waterworks Road behind **me**, But not **many** cars in **these** small streets, crazy streets like Zigzag Street, made **up** of **curious** angles and unexplained **decisions**, streets that lose themselves in the contours. That end, **and** maybe **somewhere** else begin again. (Earls, 37)

Ricky is **told** by a cashier at K-Mart (**places** are identified **with** no apology) that Brisbane is the ‘Whippersnipper capital of the world’, a bland suburban image that is undercut **in** the **book** by **manifestations** of tenderness for the local and **the** ordinary.

While Malouf **was** writing about **apathy**, angst and antithesis in *Johnno*, another writer, Gerard Lee, **the** grunge kid of the seventies, **was** also anxious to point out, **albeit in** more **disarming** and whimsical fashion, the unsophisticated and conservative nature **of** life **in** Brisbane. In *Pieces For a Glass Piano*, a collection of short stories set **in** Brisbane, one of the litmus tests for the presence or absence of sophistication **was** whether **Brisbanites** could say the ‘f’ word with **as** much artistic **ennui** **as** their Southern counterparts, One of Lee’s characters has **this to say on** the subject:

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I'd really love **to live** in **Sydney** or in Melbourne, **in** cultured circles, you know, **where** writers and **experimental film-makers** and **ad-men** and you know, everybody, come together and have intercourse using those **words** with regard to their true etymology. What **a buzz!** e.g. "O Julia, you know I really enjoy **fucking you.**"

But **up** here, [in Brisbane], it's so hard **to be** sophisticated. Julia would **knee you in** the groin. (Lee, 25)

Lee might find some solace in Nick Earls's character Ricky in *Zig Zag Street* for whom **the 'f'** word comes as naturally as ordering takeaways from the Milton Baan Thai. **So comfortable is** Earls with naming the **local that** the novel (rather like Andrew McGahan's two novels **Praise** and *1988* and Hugh Lunn's *Over the Top with Jim*) takes on a prevailing factual rather than **fictive presence,**

I would suggest that the **enormous popularity** of a book like *Over the Top with Jim* is due in large **part** to the way in which it galvanises character **to place** in fiercely nostalgic and regionally chauvinistic **ways.** A willing embracing of the local, even if it is **to puzzle** over, laugh **at** or lament its limitations, **has** become **a** kind of hallmark of **contemporary** fiction about Brisbane in **ways that** I think were not possible some **twenty years ago.** And where **writers** once went South in droves, recent writers are **choosing to stay with little** evidence of the **cultural cringe.** In a short **story** by Venero **Armano** called *Where Bread is Sweet* the author **celebrates** Brisbane's torpor and topography with little trace of provincial squeamishness:

**All Brisbane summer days are easy to like. You can spend your life** bleating and whining about **the heat** or you can **open yourself up to the** scents of flowers in full bloom, to the sounds of cicadas **and birds calling** out from **great jacaranda or deciduous trees, and to that pure** vision of **skies that** can either warm your **sallow face** or turn green **with** amazing **hail storms.** I like the heat **and I like the sweat...I've never wanted to go anywhere** else in this world...(Armano in Sheahan & Krauth, 211)

Armano's sentimental attachment **to** climate and **place** however, **is not shared** by all of his contemporaries. **Andrew McGahan** finds **little** solace in the **allergy-inducing tropics,** With **disarming honesty** and **non-embellished prose,** he tells it like it is from the perspective of Gordon, the main character:

**I stared out the window. It was a bright sweltering day, nothing to see but the glare from the neighbours' tin roofs and from the sky.** Summer in Brisbane, I contemplated **options,** (McGahan, 4)

Brisbane's **perceived lack** of sophistication **and its** frontier town image **in comparison** to other Australian **cities** is then **a kind of mixed blessing** for its writers. Even if arguably **Brisbane** has moved beyond its **status** as a 'sprawling timber town' alongside 'a lazy river' as Thea Astley once described it, the idea of Brisbane as a big country town, with all that **this image implies,** still has mythological currency and it **provides, or has provided, its** writers with a way of looking back to **lament a paradisaical past, or a way of looking** to the future for

its bright possibilities. To see Brisbane **in this** way is not only a literary conceit but **might** also be an **urban** planning **one**. **For** what else is the trend back to the idea of **self-contained** neighbourhoods (Springfield for **example**) than a journey back to the future, a **re-embracing** of **what** is sometimes lost — the local, the intimate, the **neighbourly** web of relationships — in the urban sprawl of a developing city? Writers **like** Jessica Anderson, Janette Turner Hospital, Thea **Astley**, Venero Armanno, **Rosie Scott** and Matthew Condon amongst others are **alert to** the loss of Paradise in the rush towards the technologically embossed twenty-first century, The title **of a** recent collection of short stories by Queensland writers **edited** by Robyn Sheahan and Nigel Krauth, *Paradise to Paranoia* sums **up** starkly the fear of loss, **as** does Thea **Astley's** more **pithy** but no less pertinent pun on a recent Queensland promo: 'Beautiful **one** day — developed the **next**'.

In the *Paradise to Paranoia* collection **Nick** Earls's disturbing and surrealistic story 'Meanwhile Thirty Eight above Charlotte' records the implacable face of relentless urban development. Such is the **erasure** power of urbanisation as depicted in this story that the natural Brisbane landscape of waterways and trees has disappeared and has to be invented **through art** or language or imagination. The possibilities for spiritually transformative moments in a landscape dominated by skyscrapers and freeways become for some of the characters in recent narratives less viable. Venero Armanno's novel *Romeo of the Underworld* recalls Brisbane icons that were also erased in the **name** of progress, Places **like** the now demolished Cloudland **Ballroom** are presented in this **text** as part of the landscape of youth and innocence and vitality. Cloudland is mythologised in Armanno's book as a **kind** of Holy Grail for the youth of Brisbane's **past** and its dodgy demise engineered by Gerrymander Joh in clandestine circumstances, is presented as an ominous foreshadowing of **all kinds of** post Edenic catastrophes. Andrew McGahan's **narratives of** depression, negativity and nihilism, *Praise* and *1988* (both published **in** the nineties), continue the downward spiral into the underworld of emotional bankruptcy. Brisbane is presented in these novels as a bleak and unrewarding city for its youth, especially its **male** youth who repudiate the values of the **past** but find little of comfort or reward in the present. McGahan's **Gordon** is an anaesthetised character accepting or rejecting everything with equal indifference, confessing **to** loving very little apart from his canary yellow HZ Holden **Kingswood**. These two novels, narrated with brilliant understatement and laconic humour that I think is very recognisably Australian, have appealed **to** more young male readers than the symbolic forays of Gary Crewe. **That's exactly** what **it's** like, young male readers have pointed out, referring to Gordon's permanent state of depression. Unlike earlier writers **like** Malouf, and unlike recent **writers** like Earls and Armanno, McGahan's Brisbane possesses few redemptive features — **but** then again for many of McGahan's characters there is **no** place they can call home.

Other writers do not have as much trouble as McGahan has in documenting more flattering portraits of Brisbane/Queensland, and part of the regional mythologising about **the** State includes the notion of a fresh start, **As** one critic has pointed out, 'Writers have'been interested in Queensland both **as** an area to

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escape from and an area offering the chance for a certain kind of freedom (whatever its politics) associated with the tropics.' (Gelder and Salzman, 89)

The drive to regain Paradise or to build anew is present in many recent texts set in and around Brisbane. Janette Turner Hospital reminds us in her novel *The Last Magician* that 'primordial time' still exists beyond the city's fringe where 'you enter the dark wood and keep going until the straight way is lost'. In *Charades*, another Turner Hospital novel, the main character's search for identity and belonging leads her back to her origins amidst the lush and haunting rainforests of Mt Tamborine. The flowering jacaranda trees along Coronation Drive at the conclusion to Angelika Fremd's novel *The Glass Inferno* herald a new beginning for the main character, while Belle in Rosie Scott's novel *Lives on Fire* is both sexually and spiritually revived by the languid sub-tropical heat and backyard jungle of umbrella and mango trees in Brisbane's inner city suburbs. And in Georgia Savage's *Estuary* and Rosie Scott's *Movie Dreams*, Vinnie Beaumont and Adan Young, the protagonists, travel north to Queensland to find an inner freedom to match the external freedoms inscribed, sometimes deceptively as it turns out, in the configurations of architecture (the Queensland house) and landscape. Thea Astley, credited with constructing the particular mythology of Far North Queensland (but that's another story) also contributes in many of her novels to the tension between freedom and oppression so characteristic of much literature about the State. The words of one critic, that Astley constantly 'retells the myth of the Fall and the thwarted desire for an Eden', could well be applied to any number of texts that have 'regionalised' Queensland and Brisbane over the last twenty years.

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