Chapter 5

Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh

INEZ BARANAY

Introduction

My doctoral dissertation was an interrogation of the writing of my fifth novel and seventh book, *Neem Dreams* (Baranay, 2003), a novel set in India. *Neem Dreams'* four main characters are Pandora, an Australian feminist scientist, Andy, an English lawyer, Jade, an Australian buying products for a New York store and Meenakshi, an Indian running a women's development project. They meet as a result of their separate quests related to the uses of neem, India's 'miracle tree', used since pre-history for medicine, agriculture and household purposes and, in the 1990s, also at the centre of an intellectual property dispute.

In part an examination of the relationship of yoga practice to writing practice, in part an examination of representations of India by non-Indian writers, and in part an examination of issues in writing fiction, my work led me to re-read my six previously published books: *Between Careers* (1989a), *The Saddest Pleasure* (1989b), *Pagan* (1990), *The Edge of Bali* (1992), *Rascal Rain* (1994) and *Sheila Power* (1997). I examined in turn questions raised by this re-reading: in terms of memoir (how the re-reading stimulated memories of each book's composition), of stages (how a writer develops a body of work through stages that might be seen as analogous to the stages of yoga practice)[1] and finally of the way a writer's earlier work might be read as prefiguring her latest. In this case the six texts revealed concerns that were re-visited or developed in *Neem Dreams*.

The effect of this was to find that it was impossible to ever assign a definitive interpretation to these texts.

> The act of writing is an act of production whose result, writing, continues to produce, independent of its 'author'. Through unlimited readings and rewritings, it defers meaning. In this infinite deferral of meaning, it undermines notions of representation and truth which hold that there is some original presence, some source of truth that can be restored to the text. (Cixous & Clément, 1986: 168)

My books were written and thereafter even their own author's own readings would produce a different set of meanings each time.

Between Careers: Feminism and Sex

Between Careers (Baranay, 1989a) is set in Sydney in the 1970s and explores the double life of a well-educated young woman called Vita, who takes a job as a call girl using the name Violet. In one scene, Violet is in a car with three co-workers on their way to a job and crawling through the streets of Kings Cross, with its

> crowds of tourists, touters, bikies and the odd local pushing through with a shopping bag. Susie stared at the streetwalkers: big-breasted flaunters strutting their stuff, transsexuals posing in doorways, and drug addicts curled up inside their scanty rags, heavy-eyed, nodding.
> 'How could they?' Susie said, all prim outrage. 'Standing out there on the street like that for anyone to see.'
> Not like us princesses, us chauffeur-driven dolls who keep off the streets and can even say no, within reason.
> 'They're just prostitutes,' Fay muttered.
> 'So are we,' said Violet.
> Susie and Faye were shocked ...
> 'They did this study,' Amber said, all seriousness, 'in three American cities, looking at five levels of prostitution, and they found the girls on the street would say that money was the only possible reward and they would see it as a matter of survival, not so much choice. Then when you go ...' (Baranay, 1989a: 67–8)

This scene was included in early treatments and drafts during the years various film producers were trying to develop an adaptation of the still-unpublished novel, and, in the Australian way, going to government funding agencies to pay for it. It was singled out for particular derision in a derisory recommendation against funding by a man who claimed he was 'staggered' to find that the Women's Film Fund had funded a first draft. From his more-feminist-than-you stance, this assessor claimed both that this conversation could not possibly have been had by the girls in the car, and that other scenes were unrealistic and male-oriented pornography. Feminism, then as now, is often a matter of 'What I am and they're not' or 'What they are and I'm not'. The fruitless submissions for further development funds were abandoned. (The film adaptation you want to see is one that gets the *tone* right. That wasn't going to happen.) Later it became clear to me that the staggered man had read the objectionable scenes as filmed from the man's

point of view, whereas I and my co-developers had not. We had imagined them as from the woman's point of view. Which would have made a film as cruel, then, as the novel is, and reading it today I find it cruel. Frank Moorhouse,[2] having provided the publishers with a cover line that did not make it to the cover, described *Between Careers* as 'Pain wit style cruelty – Australia's Jean Rhys' and I especially liked the word cruelty. I liked the idea of being taken for cruel, not quite sure I had it in me. Now I am an older woman reading a young woman's pitiless descriptions of men she judges as lacking her kind of style and wit, her own studied detachment; heartless in the way of the young.

Cruel it is, *and* the novel is as feminist as anything. The very question of what 'feminist' can include is explicitly raised by Vita (in those days feminism was used only in the singular).

Vita reports that 'It's not the feminist thing to do' is one of the reasons people give her in their objections to her new line of work. Her reply: 'But it's winning the war between the sexes.' She argues:

> What about how you're treated in a straight office job, always being scrutinised for proof of incompetence, irrationality and willingness to fuck? (Baranay, 1989a: 52)

Feminism needed plurality. Not that plurality is the end of any 'What's feminist and what's not' arguments. But these days it's more commonly argued that occupations like housewife or prostitute should not exclude women from feminist ranks, as long as we are assured of the exercise of 'choice'.

There was another paradox, along with the paradox of sex being the form of sublimation rather than what was being sublimated. The paradox of the fury, disgust, the 'How dare they!' indignation directed at middle-class women who took up prostitution as a choice, when for other women it was degrading and inescapable. These were arguments Vita takes some account of and which I pondered a great deal. I could only come back to a correlation as old as the oldest profession and think, What about marriage? You don't say no woman should get married because for some women marriage is degrading and inescapable.

And who is going to say which jobs under patriarchy are more or less the feminist thing to do? There was greatest condemnation for a choice that felt like a demonstration of greatest freedom, that was the paradox.

In the early 70s I loved and believed in and felt part of Women's Liberation, all the liberations. By the end of that mythical decade I was saying I was a gay man in a woman's body. This seemed to me a fresh and unique conviction, though I have seen it reproduced many times since. Madonna

says it. Camille Paglia says it. Anne Rice says it. Characters in Edmund White novels say it. Someone in Mark Doty's memoir says it (Doty, 1996: 97). There's a woman in a short story I've just read on the Internet who is 'really' a gay man (Greenman, 2001). The world is full of women who are 'really' gay men.

I recognise my own attraction to the gay world of the time in this passage from Keith Fleming's memoir of life in the 70s as the teenaged ward of his uncle Edmund White:

> I realised how theatrical my uncle was; how he and his friends had evolved a manner that could be very much like being onstage, with every sentence a potential 'line' and every facial expression a clear, even exaggerated register of what was being felt ...
>
> Ed and Keith would agree that they no longer had any patience for heart-to-heart talks, which were pointless as well as exhausting; they'd then go on to declare, in the spirit of Oscar Wilde, that everything of interest could be found on the surface of things and that deeper probing almost guaranteed a tedious conversation. (Fleming, 1999: 167, 170)

Then, as now, *gay* and *feminist* did not necessarily occupy the same space, though they might rub shoulders on a dance floor. Now, plurality and multiplicity and diversity describe all our worlds, gay and feminist overlap only part of their territories, and no dance floor is all-inclusive.

The puzzling plurality of possible feminisms is implicitly posited when Vita and her old friend Liz, another unlikely sex worker, a qualified doctor, discuss their new milieu and the madam and co-workers at their escort agency:

> '[S]he really impressed me, so tough, no bullshit. Yet this business is meant to be so – what would they say ...'
>
> 'The worst exploitation of women ... I can tell you I've never felt less exploited in a job…They're so strong and independent, without education or the women's movement ...' (Baranay, 1989a: 41)

But this is not the end of the story. And certainty, in this writer's world, is never to be trusted, always to be destabilised. The story continues, and certainties wobble.

The 'safe' sex of the 70s only meant that any STDs were cured almost as easily as you might take an aspirin for a headache. Condoms were rarely used. Violet's packet of condoms 'never gets opened because the odd strange man who wants to use them brings his own' (Baranay, 1989a: 17) – a line that was added in later drafts of the novel, for readers who no longer

could take for granted sex without them. Between the writing of the first draft and the publication of the novel 10 years passed, AIDS had appeared and our world altered extremely. Between the first two parts of the novel and its Coda, the alteration has begun and the characters have noticed.

Safety, perhaps, was always an illusion – the denial of sex's darkness, its chthonic power, its infinite complexity not always successfully excluded even in zones where the agreement is: simple fun no strings.

The advent of AIDS inevitably skewed the discourse on sexuality towards the dark revelations and mysteries of AIDS. These days I spend time with young adults who were born while I was writing this novel and for whom, therefore, AIDS has been a fact of life all their lives. And still, more than ever even, differently than ever perhaps, sex is not only commodified in increasing ways and via new media and new technologies, it is still represented as the thing we most desire, as the thing that power tries to repress while we the people defy oppression to find our truer selves in its liberating joys. And that might still be the actually oppressive belief.

By the time I wrote *Neem Dreams*, it was impossible to create a well-peopled realistic novel that did not include gay characters. Or contemporary characters that had not been touched by feminism and by AIDS. Or to write a novel worth reading that had neither. The characters in *Neem Dreams* in the mid-1990s have long lived with AIDS and also with the ever-developing discourse on feminism. Their writer has too.

It's as if taking on the issues around feminism and sex in my first novel was preparation for writing *Neem Dreams.*

Andy and Pandora establish a connection of sympathy and compatibility, not least because each understands the other has recently lost someone close, to an AIDS death – Andy his lover, Pandora her brother. Andy himself is in India in an uncertain quest for a better cure for HIV; he is positive. All he has to say is 'I'm positive' for Jade and Pandora immediately to know what he means:

> You look the person in the eye, you nod slowly and thoughtfully, you take it in, you wonder what to say, you are reminded of so much sadness, you send your thoughts to the ailing, and to the departed, you bring yourself back, be here now, look him in the eye.
> Jade and Pandora for a moment with no difference between them. (Baranay, 2003: 192)

While in the real world contentions about feminism and post-feminism seem in some places to rage and in some to expire in tedium and irrelevance, in *Neem Dreams* Meenakshi's women-based development project and Jade's independence and careerism, as well as Pandora's ecofeminist

credentials, belong to a world where feminism is an established premise. *Between Careers* prefigured an abiding concern with these issues.

The Saddest Pleasure: Fractured Time, Pattern and Composition

The Saddest Pleasure (Baranay, 1989b) is a collection of short prose in three parts: travel diaries, short stories and a novella.

There are surprises here for me as the present reader, who has forgotten how the novella 'Pearl of the Orient' had been plotted. Reading, exclaiming 'Oh no' and 'Oh good' to the writing and 'Oh!' to the revelations ('Oh' Bruce knows the amah, 'Oh' Christine has already met Paul). And, at the end, Bruce's explanation of earlier events surprises me, I do not remember until then. Was it I who wrote that? All the cells in my body have been renewed twice over since then.

Now I remember I had first begun to write 'Pearl of the Orient' as a play – I so wanted to write a play, I still want to write a play – but it wasn't going to make a play. So Part 1 is 'Act 1', the set being Melissa's living room in Penang in 1965, with 'its red-tiled floors, whirring ceiling fans, cane sofas ... a terrace that looked out to the sea' (Baranay, 1989b: 107), and 'Act 2' is set in Pearl's nightclub.

> [The] songs were new, then; they were songs of new arousals and aches and angers, they throbbed with newness and a promise of renewal ... the turning mirror-ball scattered its reflections of the string of blinking coloured lights. (Baranay, 1989b: 124)

It turned out I was writing not a play but prose and Part 3 of 'Pearl of the Orient' circles the 10 years since the events of the first two parts, which take place over less than 24 hours. This singular shape oddly works, I find today; it is not the peculiar structure that makes me go 'Oh no'.

As *Between Careers* already indicated, as the overall structure of *The Saddest Pleasure* and the pattern of this novella 'Pearl of the Orient' demonstrate, this writer will persist in the refusal of a prescribed scheme and will concern herself with the creation of arrangements specific to each piece of writing.

> [T]he composition (the architectural organisation of a work) should not be seen as some preexistent matrix, loaned to an author for him to fill out with his invention; the composition should itself be an invention, an invention that engages all the author's originality. (Kundera, 1995: 172)

Kundera's 'composition' is what we usually call 'structure' and what E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) called 'pattern and rhythm',

saying, 'For this new aspect there appears to be no literary word' (Forster, 1955: 149). Forster identifies a choice writers make: whether or not to shape their material to:

> the rigid pattern: hour-glass or grand chain or converging lines of the cathedral or diverging lines of the Catherine wheel, or bed of Procrustes – whatever image you like as long as it implies unity. (Forster, 1955: 163)

Forster concludes that his own prejudices are with the view that as this cannot be combined with:

> the immense richness of material which life provides ... life should be given the preference and must not be whittled or distended for a pattern's sake ... [T]he disadvantage of a rigid pattern [is] it may externalise the atmosphere, spring naturally from the plot, but it shuts the doors on life and leaves the novelist doing exercises, generally in the drawing room. (Forster, 1955: 163)

I'm with Forster on eschewing the demand for a rigid pattern or imposed structure while maintaining an internal, meaningful structure – what he calls rhythm. I don't know if I ever made explicit these ideas when I began to write, but they seem always to have been there. In 'Pearl of the Orient' the composition uses the method of focus on several characters; although it is largely Melissa's story, Chris and Paul and Bruce are also focalised. The present reader might find that this pre-figures or predicts the method of *Neem Dreams*.

Chronology is fractured in *Neem Dreams*. The novel contains one main thread, a story taking place over a few days, in which its characters meet in the south of India. Woven through this story are several sections that recount episodes from the pasts of the four main characters, both the very recent past of the few days before the main story, and the more distant past. In Pandora's case, episodes from childhood form a couple of these sections. This method emerged out of the writing, rather than being a given of the novel's composition. It is a risky method; a story usually requires a dominant forward movement. But it is in his chapter on 'Quickness' that Calvino remarks:

> Implicit in my tribute to lightness was my respect for weight, and so this apologia for quickness does not presume to deny the pleasures of lingering. (Calvino, 1996: 46)

Faith in the pleasure of lingering with characters in order to revisit with them some of the past moments that have brought them to, and remain part of, the present; faith in the pleasure of lingering so as to see characters in

other contexts and return with deeper understanding to the context of the main story: this faith was required as this odd structure emerged. If *Neem Dreams* is going to work, the reader must be content to circle and weave rather than maintain a steady trot down a path with a single direction, however much more elegant that option might have been.

Reading *The Saddest Pleasure* now, I'm saying 'Oh No' where I want to delete. If, as seems possible, writers are of two kinds, the taker-outer and the putter-inner, I'm a taker-outer, and I already was then. But reading this today, I still want to slash. And I wouldn't use the word race today as it has been used here: 'Spices and the sweat of several races, the scent of incense in the temples' (Baranay, 1989b: 107). Though Ajit, political radical in Part 2, resort hotel owner in Part 3, uses the word deliberately, mischievously in pre-Malaysia Malaya:

> 'You free in here!' said Pearl. 'Anything you want.'
> 'In here. Out there, better change your race,' said Ajit. (Baranay, 1989b: 130)

As Melissa steadily keeps drinking in Pearl's a few hours after she finds out her husband was killed in Vietnam, she:

> watched time and space swirl about in the smoke, turning the lights, blurring perception and existence, dissolving her certainties, leaving her in the shadow between memory and experience, between living and telling, obscuring the outlines of the imaginary and the actual ... And that was before she tried the *ganja* on the beach. (Baranay, 1989b: 131)

On her way to the beach, she exchanges a few words with the soldier who did not want to leave the war in Vietnam, longs to return there. And his monologue, following her exit, begins to fracture the realism in which this piece has been located.

I had heard of a theory in Physics that intrigued me, someone uneducated in Science. I applied this idea to the characters in 'Pearl':

> They were all particles of the universe that went on affecting each other at vast distances once they had collided, invisibly connected into infinity. (Baranay, 1989b: 148)

Shifts in perspective and fractured chronology are also employed, and acknowledged, in *Neem Dreams* especially in a key sentence:

> Time proceeded at no orderly pace in India, thought Andy, it stretched and compressed and turned on itself in spirals and fractals. (Baranay, 2003: 185)

In Part 3 of 'Pearl', the section about Chris in the hotel room (Baranay, 1989b: 146–148) can be read as Melissa's dream. Earlier that night, Paul, meeting Melissa 10 years after the night at Pearl's, mentions that Chris has also been back to Penang; and Melissa might imagine, or know, that Chris had stayed in the same room of the new resort hotel that had been built on the site of the former Pearl's. A soldier who might be the soldier from that long-ago night appears.

> There was silence until the soldier spoke. No, he didn't speak. He did speak. (Baranay, 1989b: 147)

He continues to speak as the version of the soldier we know from the obsession with the war in Vietnam – my obsession and, briefly, the culture's obsession. When I began to write 'Pearl' it was 1985, 10 years after 'Act 3' took place, 10 years after:

> Marcus was celebrating the liberation of Ho Chi Minh City, while Teng's family mourned the death of certain hopes with the fall of Saigon. (Baranay, 1989b: 138)

'Pearl of the Orient' reflects a preoccupation of the cultural moment, of the *zeitgeist*. Many years later, so does *Neem Dreams*, with its own preoccupations with globalisation and intellectual property, as well as with contemporary forms of feminism, the aftermath of AIDS and travel in a postmodern age.

Pagan: Plurality, Spirituality

Pagan (Baranay, 1990) is set in Sydney and based on a real-life scandal in 1956 linking a famous conductor with a notorious bohemian artist.

In 1950s Australia, feminism, let alone 'women's liberation', was not a common phrase. The two main female characters in *Pagan*, Nora and Eveleen, however, have never seen themselves as the 'magazine housewife' promoted as the ideal of womankind.

Nora is an ambitious young music student, a devotee of the great conductor, Eduard von Kronen, and Eveleen is a so-called 'witch', a pagan and occultist. Their worlds intersect in Sydney's bohemian area of Kings Cross, where the novel is set. The character of Eveleen can be read as prefiguring the 'women's spirituality movement' that later Pandora, in *Neem Dreams*, explicitly takes as her 'tradition'. Eveleen, isolated in the Australia of the 1940s and 50s, was hungry for the new works on wicca. She had read Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, published in 1921, which claimed to reveal the ancient religion of Western Europe:

> A joyous religion, Eveleen! A women's religion! A religion of ancient feminine knowledge and celebration. Now you know who you are ... Now when they came and asked you, 'Yes!' you told them, proudly. 'Yes, I am a witch.' (Baranay, 1990: 103–104)

Part of her involvement with the conductor was for his access, on his travels abroad, to new works – Gerald Gardner's 1954 *Witchcraft Today* was a major new source of esoteric knowledge – and the paraphernalia for rituals.

In the early 1980s new books by New Age women elaborated Murray's claim. The publishing of books on women's spirituality and wicca continues. I bought books on witchcraft in feminist bookshops, and popular exponents of contemporary wicca, such as Starhawk, began to be sold in mainstream bookshops. As I was researching *Pagan*, I became involved in the idea that the political and social discourses of feminism were expanding to a feminism of the spirit, deconstructing patriarchal religions and the patriarchal colonising of our souls.

Although I was doing this research for *Pagan*, it became part of the background to my understanding of the world of *Neem Dreams*, as Pandora's background includes an immersion in a type of New Age feminism concerned with these developments.

Eveleen in the 1940s and 50s had no peers and few resources and a taste for the left-hand path. This is part of her tragedy. In the words of a witch I spoke with in the late 1980s:

> Aleister Crowley? ... If she was following his stuff that explains a lot. He was a great magician but he really got off the track ... Evvi trusted the demons too much ... she invoked demons, not only the Deities. That's dangerous stuff ... We believe in working in groups. For psychic power and psychic protection. She was very much on her own ... she got a chaotic, undisciplined power. (Baranay, 1990: 126–7)

Writing *Pagan,* set in the mid-1950s, can be seen as preparation or background for the context of ecofeminism in the mid-1990s. Pandora is typical of the adherent Mies and Shiva are speaking of here:

> Ecofeminists in the USA seemingly put greater emphasis on the 'spiritual' than do those in Europe. [Australia, in this as in many matters, is more like the USA than Europe – IB] ... The critique of the 'spiritual' stand within the ecofeminist movement is voiced mainly by men and women from the left. Many women ... do not easily accept spiritual ecofeminism, because it is obvious that capitalism can also co-opt the 'spiritual' feminists' critique of 'materialism'.
>
> This, indeed, is already happening. The New Age and esoteric move-

> ments have created a new market for esoterica, meditation, yoga, magic, alternative health practices, most of which are fragments taken out of the contexts of oriental, particularly Chinese and Indian, cultures. Now after the material resources of the colonies have been looted, their spiritual and cultural resources are being transformed into commodities for the world market ... It is a kind of luxury spirituality ... the idealist icing on top of the material cake of the West's standard of living. (Mies & Shiva, 1993: 18–19)

By the 1990s, feminism had reached into every aspect of religious and spiritual life; even the most conservative of churches was challenged over the ordination and participation of women. Women took up the celebration of full moons and solstices, bought books of spells and the belief in goddess-centred religions of a bygone day became widespread. All of this was becoming so commonplace that it could be satirised in, for example, Francine Prose's 1995 novel *Hunters and Gatherers*, in which a group of contemporary women become devotees of Isis Moonwagon, an academic New Age priestess, and worship the goddess with her in the upmarket beaches of New York's Fire Island and the Arizona desert:

> Oh, don't you wish we could just revert to that pre-agricultural stage, when the most essential knowledge was the names of plants, which herbs cured which diseases, natural uppers and downers, and you never doubted the usefulness of each little thing you did! Every woman a doctor without the trauma of medical school! Imagine if we could time-travel back to the matriarchal era when women ran the world and everyone lived in peace! (Prose, 1995: 20–21)

And now ...

> belief in ancient matriarchy is popular among middlebrow feminists ... matriarchy is part of the general feminist atmosphere rather than a tenet of a specific school. (Osborne, 2000)

In turn, this widespread belief in a remote past dominated by matriarchy, goddess worship and ecological balance, shattered by some kind of patriarchal revolution, bringing male rule, war and sexism, is being challenged by books (such as Cynthia Eller's *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, discussed in Osborne, 2000) which point out its historical and factual inaccuracies, essentialism and ideology

Pandora (*Neem Dreams*) comes of age in a time when the women's spirituality movement is at its height and she embraces one of its offshoots, ecofeminism. She is a character whose background contains awareness of

the kinds of precursors represented by the character of Eveleen in *Pagan*. As the author of both of them, I feel that my time in Eveleen's world turned out to be preparation for writing Pandora's.

The Edge of Bali: Dreams

The Edge of Bali (Baranay, 1992) is a novel structured as three novellas, each with a tourist in Bali as the central character: 20-year-old Nelson, 40-year-old Marla and 30-year-old Tyler.

> The truest stuff you knew, it was impossible to say it properly, like telling your dreams. (Baranay, 1992: 16)

These are the thoughts of Nelson, a lost 20-year-old girl pondering the limits of verbal communication in Bali.

Although I don't recall any plan or theory guiding me, I find mention of dreams in each of the sections of *The Edge of Bali*. It is in the *practice* of writing character that I discover that attention to my own dream life has convinced me that to know characters well, know them from the inside, is to know their dreams, dream their dreams:

> She woke into a dream and woke into a dream and woke into a dream. Dream after dream opened, doors in a long long corridor, opening, opening. She was on a bed in Bali and woke to find herself on a bed in Bali and woke to find herself on a bed in Bali, in a dream ... (Baranay, 1992: 145)

Marla's dreams are prophetic. First she dreams of the lover she soon will meet, then, rather more uncannily, of the unusual scene where they first kiss:

> A large black rock, a jagged black spire, rises out of the sea, lashed by waves. It is a solitary cliff. The waters swirl and darken around it. It is a formal composition, a large dark carving of rock.
> She wakes from this dream ... (Baranay, 1992: 154)

And even Tyler, less caught up in the world of imagination, art and mystery than Marla, even Tyler, who travels to Bali to search for his missing friend, must have a dream life:

> Up to the day he had left Sydney, Tyler had dreams about Neil. He dreamt that Neil returned, bent with the weight of treasures, from imperative, magical voyages; he dreamt that Neil just showed up, in a normal way; he dreamt that Neil had been there all along and they just hadn't noticed. (Baranay, 1992: 221)

Reading this novel brings back the sense of magic, the particular atmosphere, of the Bali I experienced and the fictive Bali I created. It is not only the descriptions of the places and events on that island but the evocation of its stimulus to the imaginative life.

My own dreams were vivid and fantastic there, and that was a kind of experience I found widely reported. A place will be experienced and remembered partly through the dreams one has there and the dreams it creates. Bali was the first place I travelled to as an independent adult; this as well as the peculiar enchantments of its highly-refined culture and the fascination Bali famously held for artists and anthropologists of the modernist era, contributed to the hold Bali took on my imagination. The concern for dreams might have been initiated here with the realisation that the conscious, rational mind, crudely identified with the West, was insufficient to appreciate the Balinese values of the invisible world, the practice of magic, and the divine inspiration needed by artists.

I have written elsewhere about how important dreams are to my writing. *The Edge of Bali* is the first of my novels to incorporate my own dreams and the dreams of my characters, and these were not always separate. By the time I came to write *Neem Dreams*, as its title indicates, the dream life had become an explicit concern.[3] This concern is prefigured in *The Edge of Bali.*

Rascal Rain: Writing the Other

Rascal Rain (1994) is my first non-fiction book, an account of a year spent in Papua New Guinea, where I had gone as a volunteer to work in women's development.

> Uh-oh, hang on a minute, she checks herself, am I allowed to think of Jolly as *sweet*? Sweet, that word meaning a gentle, attractive demeanour, you can't call just anyone sweet, sinister meanings are attributed to adjectives applied to identifiable Others. Let's decide, she decides again, that there are sweet people in all the locations of the world and that I mean the same thing by it wherever I am, though that's not the end of it according to the professional perversities of certain pundits, critics keen to crow over forbidden perceptions, and whatever you might say about Others is forbidden. Never mind.
>
> 'The tea's really good,' she said. (Baranay, 2003: 56)

The author who wrote this is clearly pre-empting a certain reader response.

Pandora, who has published her PhD on working with women in development in the Pacific, is, just as clearly, no stranger to rote criticisms in the age not of orientalism but of *Orientalism*, the age of post-coloniality.

I am trying not to say 'political correctness', aware that it's a term whose meaning must be determined by its context and is most commonly used to deride or ridicule legitimate concerns about language and justice.

But there does exist a fashion in thought that gives a superior position to sentiments that deride Western culture and Enlightenment values and those that, however uncritically, valorise non-Western cultural practices and beliefs. Linked with this is a belief that every non-Western person represents the Other in some absolute way. And that every Western person represents The West and its imperialism, its imperialist crimes.

This is what a friend of mine refers to in an email from Port Moresby, apropos his own research into education in Pakistan:

> i was fascinated by ur comments on india; westernisation, greeting cards, cities; this is my thesis essentially. i have come out in my new re-write and stated that i theorise through modernity and not post modernity. i love this connection i have been reading about which equates posty with fundamentalist islamic movements and that posty is a child of the 80's neoliberal economic agenda. that in allowing the 'local' in third worlds countries u allow the hegemonic power bases that control the situation now to hold sway: papa doc is good because its local. cant complain and if u do then u the academic are charged with 'orientalism' that is the critique of 'other culture' which is a form of eurocentrism. fuck that: when women are burned by kerosene by husbands who can divorce them because they are too scarred without even telling the wife of the divorce u KNOW there are Enlightenment ideals from europe which have mitigated against such barbarisms and if they are western then jolly good. same with gays. so same with equal rights in schools ... and i take this line about how my small middle class group in Pakistan who want modernity (civil rights) are on the track to getting equitable education if they can institute such changes; which they cant because they live under fundamentalism which is 'local' which is supported by postmodernism ...
>
> so type in 'fundamental sex'. (personal email, 12.03.01)

In the hasty shorthand of personal correspondence based on many conversations, shared experiences and common assumptions, my friend is conjuring years of our consideration of our interactions in the developing world.

He happens to be one of the real-life originals for the only composite character in *Rascal Rain*, Jack. He and 'I'/the narrator puzzle over the philosophical bases for our work in Papua New Guinea:

> Nothing's too clear in this game called Development, with its many

> denominations. We are The West and we are working outside of The West (as if we could, we're always in The West that enfolds us). We are on the side of Development (education, health, women) rather than Exploitation (mines, logging). We believe in Development that responds to the desires of the people or does it always respond to needs that we define? We create? It's our knowledge, our way of life, that of the West, apparently, that is desired, what we are there to offer. Do we tell people they shouldn't think life in the West is what they see on TV and videos? ... Theory tells us it's as if the only model were evolution, as if the direction and pattern of change were immutable, and privileged knowledge of it claimed by those further advanced along its course. History is denied those who have development done to them, even while we postmods are told that we know first and last not to judge the Other on our own terms. What it looks like is, power is retained by the West, even at a time when the ecological crisis forces considerations of the limits to growth. The West's answer is, 'So let them limit their growth, we're here to tell you we know they should'. Development can be seen as a new imperialism, and if it were?
>
> Jack and I, with Lucifer bounding along nearby, get as far as we can along these lines. We go for vigorous walks ... (Baranay, 1994: 241–2)

Still, *Rascal Rain* was reviewed and critiqued as if it were not full of such passages, but a defense of imperialist projects and attitudes. A typical reviewer scolded that to describe a Melanesian man as 'sweet' was a patronising put-down. I admit my vocabulary of description of gentle, good-natured men was limited, but I also described an Irish-Australian priest and a Dutch horticulturist as sweet which, unremarked, must have been all right. When a literary journal piece slammed my book along with Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks* in terms that seemed to me to sacrifice any sensible critical points in its tone of triumphant fault-finding, and in its suggestions that are untenable to a writer's integrity, let alone practicable (e.g. I should have asked permission before writing these people into my narrative), I decided all that should not remain on the record unchallenged and published a reply:

> It seems that the only permissible representation is none at all, or one couched in terms so carefully correct that a non-academic writer is forbidden the territory. (Baranay, 1998: 53)

Writing *Rascal Rain* only emphasised that writing about identifiable Others was fraught territory.[4] But *Neem Dreams* was always going to have an Indian character, even though the contemporary writer is aware of iden-

tity politics that claim exclusive representation of certain experiences. It's not only that; even to look around an Other culture, you look, as the above passage pointed out, from 'the West that enfolds [you]'. To the *pomo*-correct critic, this means you can't create a pure, exempt position, without complicity with The West. Oh, the wicked West. Today, terms such as *culture cult* and *designer tribalism* (Sandall, 2001: *passim*) are employed to identify the piousness and forbidding of the worst of such fashions in post-modern attitude, but in turn, regrettably, are also employed to eliminate valid deconstructions of representation.

The passage from *Neem Dreams* I quoted above ('Uh-oh ... am I allowed to think of Jolly as *sweet*?') is my nod to this problem. To write *Neem Dreams* was, in effect, an answer to, or defiance of, the objections made to my *Rascal Rain* and to the foreseeable objections to the very project of writing a novel set in India with Indian characters. Although part of the material of *Rascal Rain* was an engagement with the problem of representation and position, that could not prevent a kind of criticism, stupid and useless as it might seem to me, that smugly scolds a writer for being a Westerner writing of non-Western people. It seemed that there was no solution to the problem of acknowledging this problem and yet not compromising the artistic or aesthetic sense of the work. I had bitten off more than I could chew. I consoled myself with the thought that Italo Calvino would understand:

> Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. (Calvino, 1996: 112)

In Calvino's terms, I set myself immeasureable goals in both *Rascal Rain* and *Neem Dreams*, and find that it is this very fact that provides their value.

Sheila Power: New Directions

Sheila Power (Baranay, 1997) is a satirical novel set in 1990s Sydney and Venice. It seems as different as could be from *Rascal Rain*. For one thing, I completed *Sheila* quite satisfied. Unlike either *Rascal Rain* that preceded it or *Neem Dreams* that follows it, *Sheila Power* is marked by qualities of lightness, melodrama, meta-fiction. *Sheila*'s characters are based on characters and types rather than on people, its story on storylines rather than life, its tone on a shared joke rather than a common conundrum of practical philosophy. I thought of it as 'camp', as defined by Susan Sontag:

> A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) ... It is not a natural mode of sensibility ... Indeed, the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. (Sontag, 1983: 105)

While *Neem Dreams* has an element of the fantastic in its fractured chronology and attention to dreams, and in its implication that its ending/s can be taken as dreamt rather than 'real', it is more firmly based in the experienced world and actual people than *Sheila Power* was.

While I might find in *Sheila Power* indications of future concerns in subject and theme, these concerns will become manifest in works after *Neem Dreams*. I hope to have that kind of fun again, for one thing. And yet, *Sheila Power* prefigures *Neem Dreams* in the writer's method of changing direction, immersing in a new world for a new work, departing from a known method of constructing a novel and a known kind of novel.

My next novel will be something quite different, but its seeds are undoubtedly already sown, not only in the above works, but in *Neem Dreams* also.

Conclusion

As John Fowles (1998: 382) says, The major influence on any mature writer is always his own past work. It is also true that new work influences the meaning of the past work.

If a writer examines her previous books taking into consideration her latest one, she finds new ways of reading them, new ways of understanding what the author who wrote them had achieved. And she can find in the earlier output a pre-figuring of the novel that followed.

A writer's work continues as long as the writer produces writing, and the production of each new major piece of writing effects changes upon the meaning of previous writings, for they become literary presages of the newest creation.

Readers and critics inevitably read a writer's work differently according to the extent that they know her other work. My study of my own texts shows that even their author can provide new insights when reading older texts in the light of the new.

Notes

1. Discussed in my *sun square moon: writings on yoga and writing* (Baranay, 2005).
2. A chapter of *Between Careers*, 'The Sex Part', had been published in Moorhouse's (1983) anthology *The State of the Art*.
3. More writings on the importance of dreams to writing can be found in my *sun square moon: writings on yoga and writing* (Baranay, 2005).
4. I have written further on this in an essay called 'It's the other who makes my portrait: Writing self, character and the other' (Baranay, 2004).

References

Baranay, I. (1989a) *Between Careers.* Sydney: Collins.
Baranay, I. (1989b) *The Saddest Pleasure.* Sydney: Collins.
Baranay, I. (1990) *Pagan.* Sydney: Collins Angus and Robertson.
Baranay, I. (1992) *The Edge of Bali.* Sydney: Collins Angus and Robertson.
Baranay, I. (1994) *Rascal Rain.* Sydney: Collins Angus and Robertson.
Baranay, I. (1997) *Sheila Power.* St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
Baranay, I. (1998) Theory couldn't help me. *LiNQ* 25 (1), 52–56.
Baranay, I. (2003) *Neem Dreams*. Delhi: Rupa & Co.
Baranay, I. (2004) It's the other who makes my portrait: Writing self, character and the other. TEXT 8, 2 (October). On WWW at http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/oct04/baranay.htm. Accessed 10.7.06.
Baranay, I. (2005) *sun square moon: writings on yoga and writing.* Brisbane: sun square moon.
Calvino, I. (1996) *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (P. Creagh, trans.) London: Vintage.
Cixous, H. and Clément, C. (1986) *The Newly Born Woman* (B. Wing, trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (first published 1975).
Doty, M. (1996) *Heavens Coast.* London: Jonathan Cape.
Fleming, K. (1999) Uncle Ed. *Granta* 68, 161–174.
Forster, E.M. (1955) *Aspects of the Novel.* Harmondsworth: Penguin (first published 1927).
Fowles, J. (1998) *Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings.* London: Jonathan Cape.
Greenman, B. (2001) What 100 people, real and fake, believe about Dolores. *mcsweeny's*. Online at http://www.mcsweeneys.net/2001/10/27dolores.html. Accessed 11.11.01.
Kundera, M. (1995) *Testaments Betrayed.* London: Faber and Faber.
Mies, M. and Vandana, S. (1993) *Ecofeminism.* Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
Moorhouse, F. (ed.) (1983) *The State of the Art: The Mood of Contemporary Australia in Short Stories.* Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin.
Osborne, L. (2000) False goddesses. *salon.com.* On WWW at http://www.salon.com/books/features/2000/06/28/matriarchy. Accessed 2.07.00.
Prose, F. (1995) *Hunters and Gatherers.* New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
Sandall, R. (2001) *The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press.
Sontag, S. (1983) Notes on camp. *A Susan Sontag Reader.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.