

The country and the city

Terri-ann White

Copyright ©2009 Terri-ann White. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: This is an unorthodox presentation, but one I hope that goes to the heart of some of the larger myths of contemporary Australia and the appeal still found in its pioneering spirit. It was inspired, after reading Joan London's new novel *The Good Parents* and thinking back to my own experiences of country towns in Australia, and my recent encounters with towns in transition.

Keywords: Fiction, literature, mythology.

We'd drive for the three hours to get to the town for every school holiday, leaving behind the city and its range of distractions. It seemed the country cousins would always have preferred to come to stay rather than us invade the more contained spaces and their delicate friendship circles of childhood.

We leave the city by mid-morning.

I steadfastly disobey my mother's instructions. She has bought me three pairs of new sandals the day before, to last the summer and beyond. This spirit of extravagance and abundance is new to us. Red, white, blue; in an identical style.

The problem is that I am easily influenced, and my two cousins closest in age are both older than me and they saw the sandals when they arrived last night for our journey to their home. They saw an opportunity. We could wear a pair each during my two weeks in Dalwallinu. They've never seen such attractive footwear. They help me to conceal the sandals in my little bag, at the last moment. We ruin all three pairs in the dusty stretched-out town as we parade around, the talk of the town.

We'd travelled the 250 kilometres to Dalwallinu, my aunt at the wheel. The three of us in the back seat are 8, 9 and 10. This may be my first time away from my mother with this family; something is amiss and I'm struck by nausea. It might be the fifty baby chicks in a box in the front seat being transported back to the town house with a huge backyard. It's just a barely-there smell and a constant and soothing, fluttering sound.

In retrospect my nausea may have been a guilt reaction. At one stage around lunchtime, the halfway point, I request from my aunt the option of running behind the car for the rest of the journey. My understanding formed by my suburban streets, this anecdote becomes an entrenched charming story of childhood for the extended family.

The holiday is a bonding time with the set of cousins. Not much different to daily life in the suburbs, really, although there is less to do: no beach, no movie screenings, no television or circus. The town is small, and the curious addition for me is the separate community of Plymouth Brethren who are visible but segregate from their fellow citizens. Their demeanour on the streets, and the headscarves the women and girls wear, may be my first observation of the idea of counterpoint—working together despite extreme differences of the two strands. When I return home for the start of school my mother is angry, then dismayed at the start of my wilful behaviour. The girls of Dalwallinu dream of the manifold riches available in the city. They will not taste them until they are grown-up, if they are lucky.

~

Strangeness used to come from somewhere else: the cities hold the aberrant people; country folk can be *known* and, generally, trusted within local codes.

That is why he needs to go to Perth as soon as he finishes his Junior Certificate—sixteen and ready for a life of his own choosing. In the next nine years, the rest of his life, the toll of death in his generation is unprecedented. Car accidents, gunshot wounds, accidental overdoses, suicides. He is the only one who dies of that new disease, the so-called lifestyle pandemic of AIDS. But hardly anyone finds out the grim story; *cancer* is a much easier descriptor. Community leaders warn weekly on the dangers of too much freedom.

This is a tight little community. It only just makes the ABS definition of small town population of 1500 people. There are no young people in his generation, or the one that follows, who recognize their future in their hometown. Part of the fatalities list holds that terrible tension of expectations of parents and anxiety of the community about its future. It is a kick in the teeth to *say*, to declare, that you wish to leave *now*. And yet what is to be done in a life in Narrogin, Wagin, Coolgardie, Dumbleyung, or Kondinin?

He couldn't believe the people he met in Perth—his parents had warned him about what city folk got away with, and how they had a different moral code to those he knew. In the city there are crowds and people take risks, allow eccentric ties to unfurl onto the footpath. No shame. His father used to say *every weird person is from somewhere else*. On his first day in the Hay Street Mall he stopped and listened to a woman playing guitar and singing a song about her warts. On his first night out he met a couple—a rather flamboyant man and woman—in leathers with a hint of a bondage fetish—who took him home with them and unfurled all of his expectations.

~

Impossible not to think about civic status and investments when we stay in three of the Goldfields grand hotels in our long weekend away to, as the title describes it, *Inside Australia*, in a salt lake 800 kilometres from Perth. Each of them—in Kalgoorlie, Southern Cross and Menzies—anticipate large crowds of drinkers, diners, and overnight guests in their original design, and have modified to smaller spaces with masonite room divisions and other makeshift measures.

Wide hallways and verandahs, industrial kitchens that rival later professional layouts in global hotel chains, and vast bedrooms still with some of the trappings of a boomtown grandeur now shabbily affordable at less than \$50 per night. These hotels are falling

apart through neglect and their redundancy. In the wake of recent tourism interest and a new mining boom this is only now being tended to. They won't fall down—they are too solidly built for that, but are used by sturdy owners to service short-term needs with little thought for the future. One of the hotels offers the little touches a traveler might need after driving all day, in cleanliness and comfort, but has no food left for dinner service and sends us out to a rival hotel bar to be fed. Another gives me a serious infestation of fleas, which leaves my legs a red mess for the next week.

The wealth attached to towns in the past—those Goldfields hotels, and even some wheat belt towns have them. Once, these towns paid serious attention to visitors, to their status; they had money and they invested it. That is no longer the case—money is in the domain of the individual now and rarely benefits town or region.

The salt-lake is one of those implausible sights: a vast landscape changed by the placement of things that don't belong there. Paradoxically, the *things* are sculptures made by Antony Gormley, the British artist, using magnetic resonance imaging and other measuring and interpretative tools, of local residents of the area around Lake Ballard and Menzies. We walk around this huge salt lake—ten square kilometres—to meet each figure. The ground is a squelch—it has rained in the last week in a massive tropical downpour and the formerly dried-out lake is sparkling silver mud. The 51 figures are responsible for thousands of new tourists visiting this isolation. The mud only becomes mud in our walking of it, though; the sun had caked it up and we can tell there have been no visitors for days. This vast space is silvery with a pink hue, and the silver-tinged leaves of the eucalyptus striatocalyx trees growing out of the dunes and islands of the lake offer a surprise to what we—Australians and tourists alike—expect to see in the outback. It is a trick of the imagination, this; the red earth and the stringy spinifex have us remember a sharper image, and easily forget that softness.

~

My goal in this article is to offer a fleeting impression of the country, a city-centric one, to my European colleagues especially, who may never have traveled to Australia but have a strong interest in the continent and may not realize—if they were to visit a country town—how much many of them now are tourist copies of what they once were, or an extension of our system of suburbs. That seems an interesting idea, if troubling, trying to keep a semblance of authenticity, the core of the original, as if our image depends upon it. It is a marker of the value attached to this aspect of Australian life. The *idea* of the pioneer is such a defining story, and we are in a transition time about our country and our city.

In San Francisco recently I was struck again by this powerful and ongoing myth of the tough, physical Australian when I found the obligatory *Australian Fair* shop filled with the items of clothing we are so well known for: the Drizabone raincoat, the Akubra hat, belts and buckles and cowboy clothes.

Memories of past times or circumstances always carry some danger of a simplified response, of the thrill of nostalgia and how it can butter you up to imagine you were present for the best or worst experiences.

I'm imagining Australia through the story it still tells itself, its strong mythology of an agricultural base, a veritable food bowl, and think about what happens in this coast-clinging continent when its food sources change, when diminishing water finally forces changes in agricultural practices. When country towns become as sophisticated as the city and suburbs, become a place to escape to rather than establishing yourself in: financially, setting up a family—when towns were service centres with a mobile population of doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, bank clerks and police. This is as it was for most of the twentieth century, when training in some fields came with an obligation to serve outside the city. Staffing of service industries are now in crisis outside the cities, and English and American policemen, as an example, have recently been vigorously recruited, as have Indian doctors and dentists, to take up positions in Corrigin, Eucla, Yarloop, Gnowangerup, and Tambellup.

What happens to our sense of Australian-ness: we still appear so anxious about such a concept: those battlers on the land, the wide open plain and cleared paddock, the community rallying around the Coop, the main street, the pub, the coming and going of people of all generations who cannot cope here or elsewhere.

That huge myth, the idea of a national character—the pioneer-spirited man of the soil, industrious, tough, is mostly the image that we are defined by. In the San Francisco store they present the full package, in and of itself, entirely self-referring and marked out as *different* to the American tough guy; yet when we make wine or literature they can, blessedly, be judged in their own terms. We allow the urbanity in.

How does this image ever alter, or be addressed? As the sprawl of suburbia reaches more than 100 kilometres of uninterrupted settlement there are fewer people working the land and more making what is referred to as a tree-change—the foregoing of the city life and the pressured job for something more truncated—less work and pressure, more space, a back-to-nature without having to do the backbreaking labour of breaking in the land—this dream is conducted in 4 x 3 modern houses (that is 4 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, the latest fashion). It is the convenient light aircraft from the nearest town's airstrip, the interconnectivity of the home office. This can only happen in or after an economic boom, but the way it has changed the landscape in a place like Western Australia over the past 5 years is profound. The hundreds of city apartments in large cities like Sydney and Melbourne, too, only occasionally used by their owners who live in the country, is staggering to a small city girl like me. I'm not making judgements here, just observing.

Once, when you lived in the country you were obliged to maintain a firm focus on the topics that interest you. You'll have fewer chances to be able to compare. It is a paucity of choice, but only if you already know about choice. That paucity of experience—and choice—makes for the need of a definitive stance. If you only see, for instance, one theatrical play every two or so years, there is no point for comparative appreciation. If you've only read one newspaper in your life, the same applies. One of two judgements can come out of this, neither of them that useful: outright acclaim, unconditional approval of the experience, or a cynicism borne out of idealizing the genre and a lack of opportunities to learn the vocabulary.

~

The food bowl. I recall in all of those holiday periods on Wheatbelt farms when uncles and cousins tended to the annual cycle of wheat and sheep harvesting: planting, growing, shearing, harvesting, slaughtering. It was all very serious business, and enabled the seven children in the family to board at exclusive city schools. Most of the family is still on the land, but their children are not. The future of Australia's growth does not remain in this form of agriculture, in the small to medium sized family-based enterprise, managing all required duties and outsourcing the others to locals. The automation and rationalizing of the industry means that this repertoire of skills and knowledge changes, that city cousins don't get a chance to handle animals, know where food comes from, ramble widely and take physical risks. An understanding of food and its production was one of the important revelations of my childhood holidays on farms, giving me the grounds to decide what I was prepared to eat, if somewhat precociously. And the more widespread the depletion of people farming the land the fewer citizens there will be in country towns in service industries.

While all of these changes take place, though, there is the parallel movement of food fetishism: the micro-world that obsesses about food requires to know information at such a specialist level that it can pinpoint the name of the goat or cow that produced the milk; the paddock—identified on Google Earth, where Daisy grazed.

At Dreamworld amusement park on the Gold Coast of Queensland I watched a performance in a faux bush camp with fire roaring, billy boiling, whips cracking, animals lined up for tricks. It was a poignant collecting up of a world past, much more realistic than Steve Irwin the crocodile hunter, by a man in full cowboy gear with numerous dirty jokes and racist slurs all disguised with good-humour. I've seen performers like this since my childhood; the template hasn't changed at all. That the Aussie cowboy now lived without a horse, the ultimate live flesh show, and made a living amongst fabrications and wild whirring amusement park rides seemed lost on most of the audience.

~

At the age of 32, with her three children aged 9,7 and 5 safely in their classrooms for the day and her husband miles away in a far paddock, she jumped out of the window of their rambling homestead farmhouse, lovingly restored by her to its great glory with help from her husband and some of his farm labourers, and ran away with the visiting art teacher she'd met the week before who was returning to Perth that morning. It was, as such events often are, fueled by passion, it was spur of the moment, and entirely constructed out of their first afternoon together. The idea was simply novel, created from their heat that day. All she knew was that it would be impossible to come back if she carried out her departure plan. She'd seen people—not just women—try and return from grand gestures and it had never worked. From her childhood years in a country town she had encountered the walking dead: people in families or alone who'd tried out one too many transgressions and now had no place—travelling the country trying to find one. But the stink was always palpable and locals always sorted them out—sometimes too late— or tripped them up. Shysters. People with secrets earnestly demonstrating trustworthiness; their children necessarily complicit to confect a history to tell their new friends.

She hadn't grown up in this town, but her husband had. She'd been born in the city and spent some years in an atypical country town—Broome, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It couldn't have been more different from her marriage home: Broome was a town with an historical multiculturalism, one of the few not dominated by white Europeans with an indigenous population largely on the fringes, present but not players in the social and economic play. It was differently formed in the nineteenth century through a pearling industry that included Japanese, Malays, Aboriginal, and Chinese workers and this mix meant that generations later it was harder to categorize people through race or ethnicity.

Her parents were the managers of one of the hotels in town, and her musical appreciation started with Wednesday night entertainment. Broome became part of the circuit for revival tours of groups such as The Platters, usually a little past their prime. At the same time, her father employed The Broome Beats—a group of young men who could only get one weekly gig, but became distinguished musicians and composers before the end of the century. Jimmy Chi was the core of this group, along with the Pigram Brothers and others.

Being in the hotel meant meeting all of the fakes who flew through town, as the hotelier was an essential contact in the life of the town. Our young girl watched the shysters and took notes for how she wanted to be as an adult.

She couldn't ever compare Wyalkatchem with Broome—they were in different parallel worlds. She knew that the sweat she produced with her young lover in this most surprising tryst, the first since her marriage, was more than a physical response and she should consider, again, what she was doing here, in a town of a little more than 600, a town where *volunteering is the norm rather than the exception*, and lodged as the first daughter-in-law in the patrician family. They weren't the salt of the earth, but they had an ongoing obligation to the town's workers; that mostly meant for her no chance of her husband ever wanting to change where they lived, or how. She'd probably made a mistake.

The obsolete farm machinery sits in a field on the edge of the town looking like a sculpture park or a cemetery. In all shapes and scales, rusted from years of sitting exposed. The hallmark of the town carries a tidy ethos—there are citizens who desire a cleanup of this field of dead objects, but most of them are not farmers. The farmers know the worth of this capital investment, and the long associations within the town. But the question still needs to be asked: what is it doing out in this gateway to the town, and what should be done with it?

Part of the ethos of that pioneering phase of Australian settlement was prudence. The balance is now shifted: smaller farming enterprises are beyond prudence and usually at the whim banks towards foreclosure. The conglomerate farming businesses, known as agrochemical industries by those opposed to their methods of maximum yield at whatever cost, operate with the machinery of the corporation. The tree-changers are usually cashed up, bringing a fresh new way of shopping to their town, a novelty, and encouraging retailers to stock imported and artisanal goods.

~

For context: Joan London's characters in *The Good Parents*, Jacob and Toni, leave the city of Perth in a hurry. The imperative is Toni's escape from an oppressive marriage, but Jacob has been privately planning for years to join a commune and explore an alternative life in that region. Their commune experience, short lived and unsatisfying, catapults them into a nearby country town and into that option of the service industry—Jacob becomes a schoolteacher. At some point, with two children and a happy life, they forget that the threat of the vindictive ex-husband has expired and just settle into life in their town.

Terri-ann White is a writer (*Night and Day; Finding Theodore and Brina*), publisher (UWA Press) and directs a cross-disciplinary centre (Institute of Advanced Studies) at the University of Western Australia in Perth.