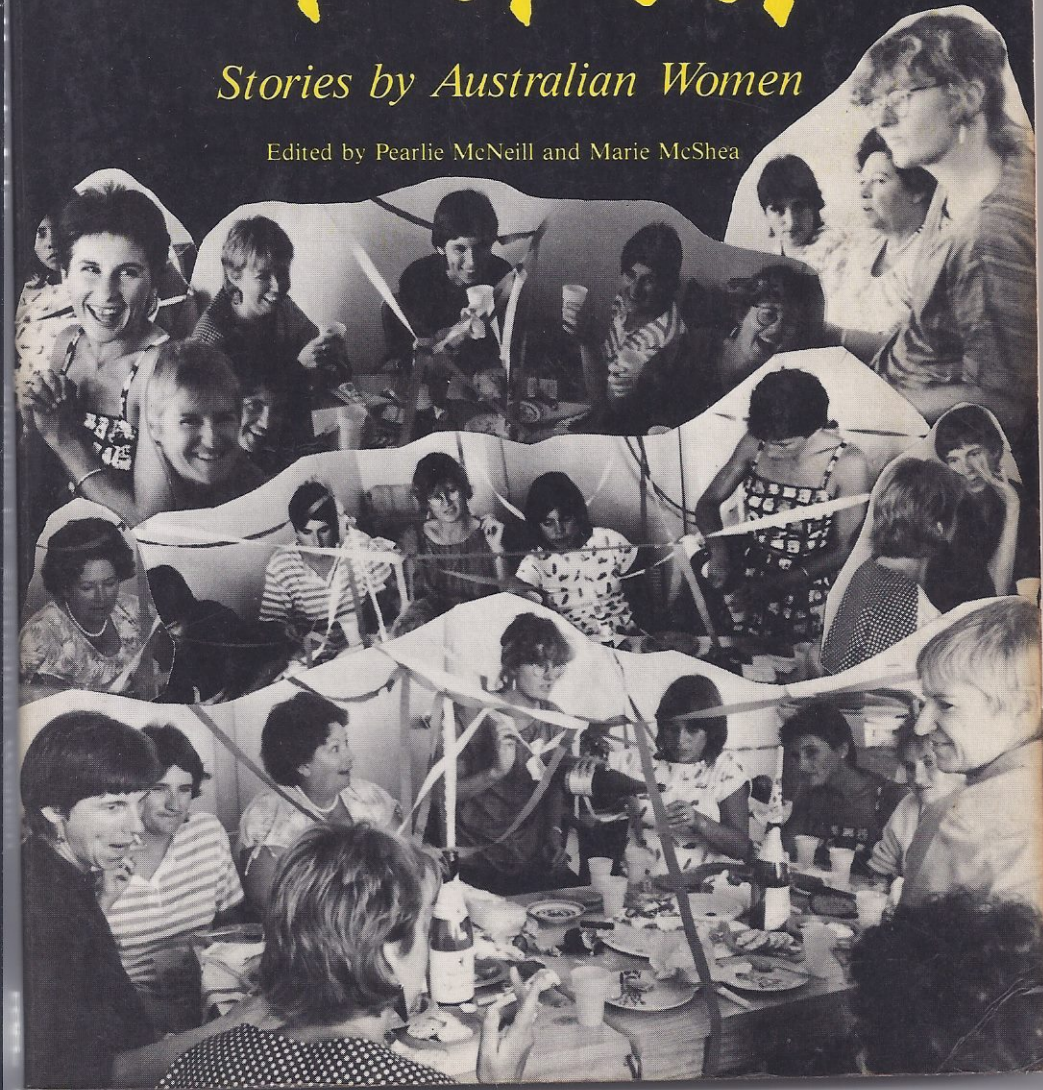
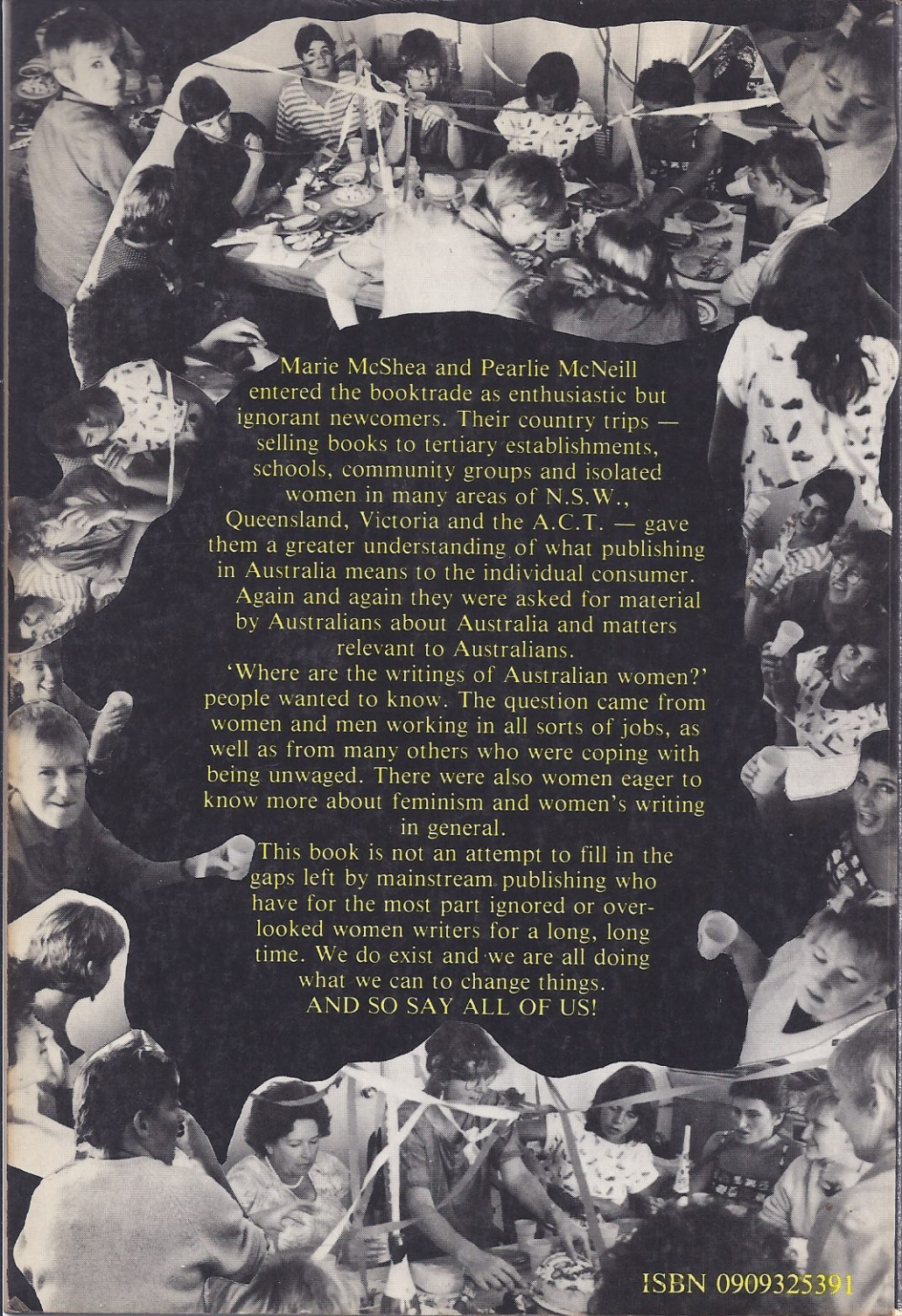


And So Say All of Us!

Stories by Australian Women

Edited by Pearlie McNeill and Marie McShea





Marie McShea and Pearlie McNeill entered the booktrade as enthusiastic but ignorant newcomers. Their country trips — selling books to tertiary establishments, schools, community groups and isolated women in many areas of N.S.W., Queensland, Victoria and the A.C.T. — gave them a greater understanding of what publishing in Australia means to the individual consumer. Again and again they were asked for material by Australians about Australia and matters relevant to Australians.

‘Where are the writings of Australian women?’ people wanted to know. The question came from women and men working in all sorts of jobs, as well as from many others who were coping with being unwaged. There were also women eager to know more about feminism and women’s writing in general.

This book is not an attempt to fill in the gaps left by mainstream publishing who have for the most part ignored or overlooked women writers for a long, long time. We do exist and we are all doing what we can to change things.

AND SO SAY ALL OF US!

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Berwyn Lewis

Berwyn Lewis has used and played with language ever since she first discovered words as a means of making connections. She has been forced to live by her words — freelance journalist, play and scriptwriter for radio and stage, and prose writer.

Born in 1944, raised in Bowral, N.S.W., informed by tree, mountain, sky and earth spirits, badly educated, narrowly escaping the fate of a convent, a cousin and/or a marriage, she began writing at an early age. She lived in England from 1966-1970.

These days Berwyn is involved in exploring the limits of inspiration, dedication and perseverance balanced by daily jogging, swimming, writing, yoga and meditation. Secretly she hopes to be one of the first journalists and playwrights in outer space.

She is currently working on a radio play commissioned by ABC Radio, a novel (for which she received a Literature Board Grant), reviewing Sydney theatre, and writing features for newspapers.

Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday

The world is over-populated and
yet there are not enough people
to go around....

It's spring and the garden responds with a grand display that belies the age of its twisted trunks and gnarled vines. The grass is a carpet patterned with fallen flowers, fat, red camellias and mauvey-blue jacarandas.

There's something startling about this annual transformation, the contrast between the violent colours framed against soft, grey clouds. It reminds me of a Zen garden and how mysterious life is — is it a dream and am I dreaming it or is it dreaming me?

When I was younger I didn't consider things in this way but now I wonder whether it is all an illusion of my own creation.

... .. One evening I was walking home from work. The windows of the distant city blazed with the gold of the setting sun. As I rounded the corner of my street I knew the man who was coming towards me before I looked at him. I'd never seen him before yet I correctly anticipated what he would look like. A shudder travelled up my spine as we passed each other but as soon as he had gone this feeling left me.

In an instant of clarity which followed I knew who he was. It was an almost laughable thought but I felt that this man personified Death.

It wasn't that he was carrying a scythe or wore skulls round

his neck. He didn't even have long, lank hair. He was a completely unremarkable old man.

I reached my house and went inside.

A few hours later I remembered I hadn't checked my letter box. Because I lead a solitary kind of life my mail is important to me. I'm always hoping for some news from a distant friend or a word from a long-departed lover, but, that night, as more often than not, the mail box was empty.

'Kara...Kara...,' I turned. My neighbour was calling me from the half-light of her open doorway.

I walked over to her gateway.

'Have you heard the....news?' she asked.

'What news?'

She paused. Her face very white and still.

'Steven has passed away.'

I was stunned. A gush of words struggled out of my mouth.

'Were you expecting it?'

— What was I saying? Expecting 'it', like a baby? How can anyone expect death? I knew he'd been ill but not with such a finality. I tried to explain and succeeded in making even more of a mess of words.

Then I looked at her. The deficiency of language when it comes to expressions related to death left me mute. I felt so inadequate.

I wanted to say all sorts of prosaic words of encouragement — death doesn't mean an end; death's just another state; life goes on; I'm sorry to hear... ..; how cheap, cutting and denying it sounded so I didn't say anything.

The big house with its dim lights loomed behind her frail, little face.

'When did it happen?' I finally asked.

'A few hours ago.'

I was dumbstruck again.

I'd seen the old man and felt the presence of death. I couldn't tell her. It would frighten her. She might think I was a witch. She might think I'd killed him or put a spell on him.

'What will you do now?' I asked her.

'I shall manage,' she said with a neat smile but her eyes were dancing. She had cast off some enormous load. She was already floating in the dreamy meadows of a dawning freedom.

'Life goes on, doesn't it...?' she said.

'Yes. It does.' I said and having offered my help if she should need it I left. I was afraid we would begin to exchange clichés.

Shortly after that I had to leave the neighbourhood and I never saw that woman again but that evening was the start of my getting to know Death. It began to re-appear in various forms.

Perhaps it was because I'd unwittingly wandered into Death's landscape. I'd almost bumped into that old man and he had noticed me.

From that moment I was marked, followed and hunted by Death. Sometimes it felt like we were dancing together. At other times I felt we were playing and flirting with each other. The appearances became more frequent. They came in dreams with an almost absurd series of images — bats, demons, skulls and shadowy people beckoning to me. But why me? I was too young!

Was it just because I'd been coming up the street when He'd been making His exit from the house next door?

Maybe I should have said hello and been more pleasant. Perhaps I shouldn't have stared so hard at Him.

It's too late now. I have come to know Death and why there are dances, festivals and mardi gras held in His honour. I have invited Him to come closer. I have teased Him. I have longed for and embraced Him.

At other times I have thrust Him away and once I fought with Him.

I was dreaming and He appeared as a demonic little creature. He came clattering through a strangely angled door. I was lying on a bed and He came towards me with a scraping, stumbling swagger. There was a mat beside the bed and it had unrecognisable writing on it. It looked like Sanskrit or Hebrew. At that moment my cat came bounding across the floor. He intended to rescue or protect me but when he saw the writing on the mat he couldn't cross it to get to the bed. He backed away and the demon kept coming.

I sprang out of bed and kicked the demon.

'I'm not here,' I said with surprising aggression and the demon backed away into the door which slammed shut.

That was easy. It doesn't take much to scare a demon before it scares you, I thought, and woke up.

I believe I learned something from that dream. It will sound strange but I think I'm reaching a point where I'm being taught the final lesson — how to relate to what awaits me when I encounter my death. — Or, am I creating another illusion? The illusion of my death?

Only time will tell and as I watch the camellias and jacarandas gradually covering the grass the days go by and the tapestry of the carpet outside fills in, bit by bit, flower by flower.

Today it rained and the weaving of the grass carpet came to a halt. I met a friend and we went for a walk along a beach. It was low tide so we crossed an exposed sandbar to an outcrop of rocks which are generously described as an island. We stood on top of the highest rock and yelled at the wind and the stormy sky.

'Who do You think You are anyway, God?' we shouted. We felt so strong we thought we'd say how we felt about the divine way of things.

'Look at the mess you've made!' we declared and suddenly my friend began to weep. It's one of the few times I've seen a man weep, especially a young one.

'Why are you crying?' I asked, but I already knew. Our thoughts travel faster than our words.

— By abusing God's way we were taking a liberty, stepping outside the usual way of looking at things and it filled us with an immense power and fear. It dawned on us that we were as much in control as God and equally as responsible. Suddenly we felt the hopelessness of not having God to rely on, to blame for everything.

I began to cry too. I realised how close I was to this young man and how much I loved him, yet the nature of my love was totally free and if I never saw him again I knew I'd always remember this moment.

We sat down on the rock. Tears were streaming down my face and his. A young boy was walking along the water's edge. His arms were covered in tattoos. His clothes were soaked. He was leaning into the wind and walking with such extreme urgency to the other end of the beach that he made me laugh. The situation was absurd, and wonderful. There was no reason in anything and how pretentious it was to expect one. It was all a divine joke and if you didn't get it there was no use crying.

Death began to dance round me again. It tapped me on the

shoulder offering me a release from this cosmic playfulness. I had finally got the joke and I deserved to join the joke players. I could become a macabre, divine jester if I chose.

The tide was beginning to rise. Death by drowning? I felt hungry. Death by starvation perhaps?

The prospect of a hamburger, cakes and ice cream won the day. My friend and I got to our feet and walked back through the lapping waves of the incoming tide.

Back on the mainland a fun fair was in full swing. Merry-go-rounds, clowns, fairy floss and balloons filled the beach front with a brazen disregard for our morbidity and the threatening sky.

We ate, walked to the railway station, caught a train and by the time I reached home the sun was out and the grass in the garden was completely covered with camellia and jacaranda blossoms.

The clock ticks louder, the music on the radio sounds sweeter, the flowers are brighter and the neighbour's children seem more radiant.

I wonder at my discontent and sense of waste.

No matter how much there is to go around there's never enough.