

How to write history about Australia that is ugly

The Summer Exercises

By Ross Gibson

University of Western Australia Press, 270pp, \$24.95, 2008.

ISBN: 978-1921401-20-6

Reviewed by Simon Robb

This is an ugly sort of book that you wouldn't leave lying around for some kid to see.

If you're the sort that likes photos of dead people you don't even know, be my guest.

Maybe you fancy a dead man lying on his bed in a squalid room with disgusting curtains and an old wireless and walls that look like they've never been cleaned and words about a 'Slow decay', 'Living into dying', 'Leaching' and something about a bang and a whimper.

W.B. Yeats' death scene? No. Just a poor dead mug.

There are dead mugs and plenty of mug shots of criminals here if you like that sort of thing.

Maybe you like the idea of a seamy old Australia. It's here if you want it.

There's a real stink here that emanates powerfully of filth, poverty and ignorance.

There's also a fictional stink. Cops and robbers. A priest doing confessional writing. Investigating the real and its materiality, its poetics and spirit, that's a story about detectives and priests.

This is a book leaden with materiality.

This is a good book for people who want to imagine walking through a museum of fading, decomposing, infested, archaic Australian society.

Australians, cop your own filthy ugly historical things.

This is an Australia where a steak and salad dinner meant a slab of meat with couple of slices of tomatoes and some diced lettuce. Those salad days are gone. You don't have to worry about those days anymore, unless you're a cop, or a priest, or poor, or homeless, or young and on the streets. If you are you might want to avoid this book, or you might want to carry it with you, as a guide.

This is a collection of stinking zombies aka white Australia 1946-64. Zombies populating Sydney, trying to look like normal citizens on bad hair days.

The story doesn't matter so much. It's a story about a priest working with some Sydney detectives and following them to crime scenes. He also does some of his own investigations. Follows the traces of a woman who fled from her boring life to seamy Sydney night clubs and porno films made somewhere in the bush. The story doesn't matter so much because it's really something to hang the pictures on. Pictures need walls to hang on. The story's like the walls of a museum. And these walls hang the pictures pretty well.

The priest's narrative hangs on an idea that's Christian and old. It's the idea of writing as a spiritual exercise. Finding out about your relationship to God by interrogating the ways of the world, the way you read the world, and what's really inside your spirit. This is the wall the priest's narrative hangs on.

This is a book that will tell you how to write history about Australia that is ugly. If you find yourself with photos of a past thing, an historical thing (take for example the mean-streets of post war Sydney), and you decide you want to *do* something with them, then you have to choose, why this one, why that one? That's a hard choice to make and we don't know what motivated the choices in this particular instance because we don't know what's going on inside the head of one Ross Gibson.

There are pictures here of streetscapes exploding in ethereal light, and other sublime instances. We might say they resonate aesthetically, which is an inadequate way of saying they are beautiful. We don't have to say why we choose beauty, if we don't want to. But we need to make the choices work. This photo, because it's beautiful, that's an aesthetic choice. This photo because it's needed, that's a practical choice, and this process goes on and on until we get to making the historical things work.

Historical things can hang on a wall but no one will notice them unless they are hung right. The right way to hang historical things is with the right words. The words in this book are good and right. They hang the historical things so they can be seen in the pure light of day and the pure darkness of the night.

That's why there's a priest who writes and sees. He's there to do the sublime and aesthetic work that's needed to hang the historical things up right. And if he's also grounded in the cop view of things, that's for the materiality of things to be present and accounted for, as things always are, on the mean streets.

A museum without walls used to be an interesting idea. But all the things fall to the ground when there's no walls. Or they blow away. Or get rained on. Or burnt to the ground. If you want to show the old things because they engulf you with a desire to live, or because they glow with the life of another world, then you need to hang them on something like a wall made from good words.

There are good words here and there are good walls made from words to hang the historical things that will help you to read history about Australia that is ugly.

Simon Robb is a writer interested in experimental histories. He is currently a Research Fellow at the University of South Australia working on ideas of hopefulness, youth and marginality. His previous publications The Hulk (Post Taste, 2003).