



Being a writer in Adelaide

NICHOLAS JOSE

MURRAY BAIL caused consternation among the creative writing students at the University of Adelaide when he told them that if they wanted to be writers they should get out of Adelaide. The irony was that Bail, returning to Adelaide to visit the program in 2006, was such a person – a writer who had got out. Born in Adelaide in 1941, he left when young and travelled the world before eventually settling in Sydney. Yet so much of the fiction for which Murray Bail is admired returns to an Adelaide that is etched in memory from another time, a continuing source of inspiration. The opening pages of the novel *Holden's Performance* (1987) are a virtuoso example:

When the last of the city's trams were removed with their poles and bells and the industrial paraphernalia of lines imposed on the mind's eye, it was as though a great net had been lifted clear of the city, letting in light ... It was a small city and flat. There could be no escaping the trams ... On summer nights it seemed as if the sky had been lowered to a false ceiling joined to the earth by a monopoly of constantly moving poles, emitting at set intervals their own brand of pale blue lightning ... All this had been going on for as long as anyone could remember, and no one thought much about it ... The city was laid out along the lines of a timetable.

As a writer, Murray Bail never entirely left.

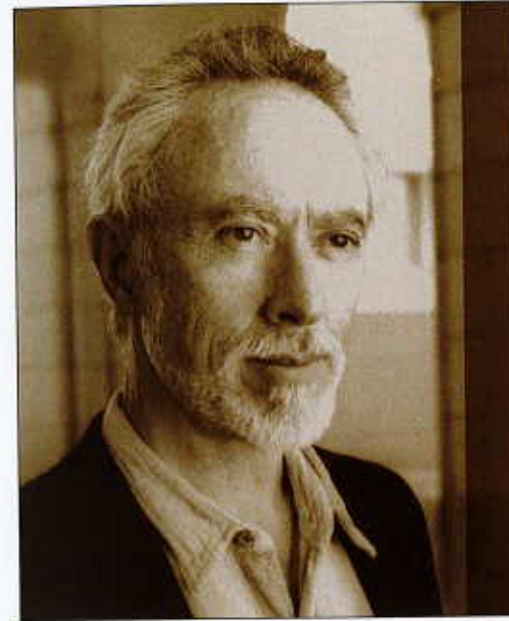
The worried creative writers gathered in the Napier Building on that memorable occasion were enrolled in the program that the University of Adelaide launched with the appointment of Australia's first Chair of

Creative Writing in 1997, with state government support. Graduate courses were offered in this flourishing new area, accommodated in the Department of English where many South Australian writers had studied and taught over the years.¹

Poet Thomas Shapcott was the inaugural Chair. I followed Tom in the role from 2005 to 2008 when Brian Castro took over, and now, since 2020, Patrick Flanery. Students have come from far and wide. Many have brought local connections and have written South Australian stories, whether as fiction, poetry or non-fiction. The program's reputation was enhanced when JM Coetzee moved to the University of Adelaide in 2002 and won the Nobel Prize in Literature the next year.

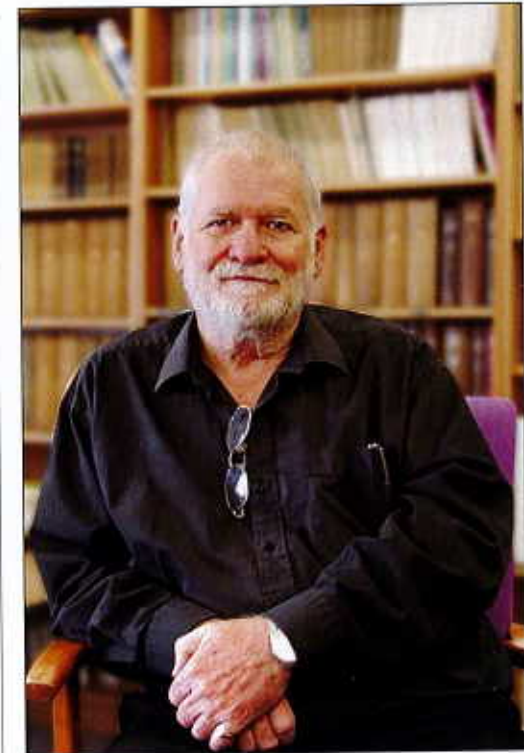
Works by students in the program have been published locally, nationally and internationally. They have been widely reviewed and acclaimed and have won many prizes and commendations. A good number of the graduates have continued to write in South Australia, showing that you can do so successfully, even if at a remove from the media, publishing and literary concentrations of Melbourne and Sydney.

¹ Philip Butters, 'English and Creative Writing: the abode of ... literature; the home of poetry and fiction', *A History of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Adelaide 1876–2012*, eds. Nick Harvey, Jean Fornasiero, Greg McCarthy, Clem Macintyre and Carl Crossin, pp 109–32.



JM Coetzee

It's dangerous to name names at random, but a list would include writers as various as Anne Bartlett, whose debut novel *Knitting* was published in New York in 2005 and listed for Australia's Miles Franklin Literary Award; poet Cath Kenneally, author of *Jetty Road*, a novel published in 2009, and inaugural Coetzee Centre Writer in Residence at the University of Adelaide in 2015; Carol LeFevre, whose 2020 novel *Murmurations* was shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards; Amy T Matthews, whose 2011 debut novel *End of the Night Girl* won the Best Unpublished Manuscript in the Adelaide Festival Awards and was published by Wakefield Press, home to so many South Australian writers; multiple award-winning sci-fi and fantasy author Sean Williams; Dylan Coleman, whose 2012 novel *Mazin Grace* won the David Unaipon Award; Jared Thomas, whose 2013 YA novel *Calypso Summer* won the international White Raven award; Rebekah Clarkson, whose *Barking Dogs*



Thomas Shapcott



Anne Bartlett

(2017) is a short story series set in Mount Barker; Patrick Allington, whose 2020 novel *Rise & Shine* predicts a dystopic future; Adelaide poet and novelist Heather Taylor Johnson, who spent twenty-five years moving around the United States before putting down roots in South Australia in 1999; Aidan Coleman, one of this country's most esteemed contemporary poets; Emma McEwin, whose innovative biography of her great-grandfather was published as *The Many Lives of Douglas Mawson* in 2018, and Shannon Burns, whose memoir *Childhood* has just appeared.

That's only a start and I apologise to the many other writers whose names belong on the list, as well as all those graduates from the sister programs at Flinders University and the University of South Australia who, across a spectrum of forms and styles, from romance to environmental writing, contribute to the critical mass of practitioners working in this state.

JM Coetzee published an 'Adelaide novel', *Slow Man* (2005), from which a reader can almost map the cycle route into town from the foothills. Peter Goldsworthy, a hospitable champion of literary Adelaide, maps the well-trodden streets of the CBD in the footsteps of a blind detective in his recent thriller *Minotaur* (2019). Flinders star Hannah Kent returns to the Adelaide Hills for her third novel *Devotion* (2021).

How is it to write *in* and *of* Adelaide?

Writers' Week, which began in tandem with the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1960, has built the city's literary reputation over the years. As one of the first writers' festivals anywhere in the world, Adelaide's prestigious biennial event was the gold standard for a long time, hosting many of the world's great writers, often before they were famous. At the beginning, Writers' Week was organised by a committee chaired by the State Librarian and hosted by the University of

Adelaide.² Local poet and litterateur Geoffrey Dutton played a key role and many other South Australian writers participated over the years. Writers' Week brought the literary world to town, if only for a few days, and put Adelaide on the literary map. It was as exciting for local writers as it was for local readers. In the process connections were made and enduring relationships formed.

But, as Philip Butters shows in *Adelaide: a literary city*, a collection of essays published in 2013, that's only part of the story. The book includes work by yet more South Australian writers and literary critics, including Kerryn Goldsworthy, author of *Adelaide* (2011), a personal essay by an insider to the place; Susan Sheridan on a trio of women writers from Adelaide, Nancy Cato, Geraldine Halls and Nene Gare; historian (and biographer of Miles Franklin) Jill Roe; and poet Jill Jones on poet Ken Bolton, whose Lee Marvin Readings at the Dark Horsey Bookshop in the Experimental Art Foundation were a highpoint of Adelaide literary life in the 2000s.

Apprentice writers learn from role models. If their inspiration comes from books for the most part, the presence of stylish live examples can be a real encouragement. In that sense Adelaide has been a 'Friendly Street', to borrow the name of another long-running community institution – a fertile and supportive place in which to write.

For me growing up in Adelaide in the 1960s, writers were names on book covers. Biographical information was scant. There was seldom even a photograph. Sometimes they were known by initials only: AA, TE, TS, DH, JRR, PD – authors, not living people, and none of them Australian.

Not many books were published in Australia

² Ruth Starke, 'Writers' Week', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/events/writers-week>, accessed 11 September 2022.



Rebekah Clarkson at the launch of *Barking Dogs* with Nicholas Jose and Rick and Sue Hosking.

PHOTOGRAPH - andrew noble

back then, especially not novels. As provincial readers, we were good at using our imaginations. It was a shock when something appeared that was set nearer to home. *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* (1965) by Randolph Stow was a book we read at school. Stow had South Australian connections on his father's side. His book was recognisable in a surprising and resonant way.

The poetry of Judith Wright was another popular set text. She came to speak at my school. I don't remember what she said but I do remember the urgency and power of her voice, as if each word were a stone that had to be felt in the mouth. The only local writer who came to speak at school, I think, was Geoffrey Dutton. I remember his voice too, confident in talking about poetry, which surely gave some confidence to those of us who were interested in writing poems.

Max Harris was another local writer who could be seen in Mary Martin's Bookshop in the city. His imported hardback remainders of authors such as Lawrence Durrell and Vladimir Nabokov helped expand my literary horizon when I came to browse on my way home from

school. And my mother used to talk to Barbara Hanrahan in our local butcher shop. *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, written and published in London in 1973, is still one of the most evocative books about growing up in Adelaide. Hanrahan sees it all in her own extraordinary way:

Sometimes I knelt on the chair at the window; stayed there for hours: elbows out, eyes glazed—sucking and gnawing at the sill, incised already with toothy crescent moons. I looked across the redness of the verandah and the pebble-dash wall blurred by roses. I saw the rockery and the gravel, and the geraniums the colour of blood, the tinsel cinerarias and the lamb's ears. I ignored the ugliness of the gas-box, gazed past the cyclone trellis of fence – to the house across the road.

This house intrigued me.

Being a writer in South Australia, there is a particular, rich literary legacy to be uncovered. As a schoolboy I found John Shaw Neilson, that magical poet, and it was wonderful that he was born in Penola, SA. I regret that other South Australian writers from the past were not more present to me back then, not celebrated. Or perhaps they were and I was looking away.

I have since dug them out: Catherine

Martin's *An Australian Girl* (1890) and *The Incredible Journey* (1923); Simpson Newland's *Paving the Way* (1893); David Unaipon's *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (1924–25, published 2001, edited by Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker); Phyllis Somerville's *Not Only in Stone* (1942); WA Cawthorne's *The Kangaroo Islanders* (c1854, 1926, published by Wakefield Press in 2020 with Rick Hosking's informative commentary).

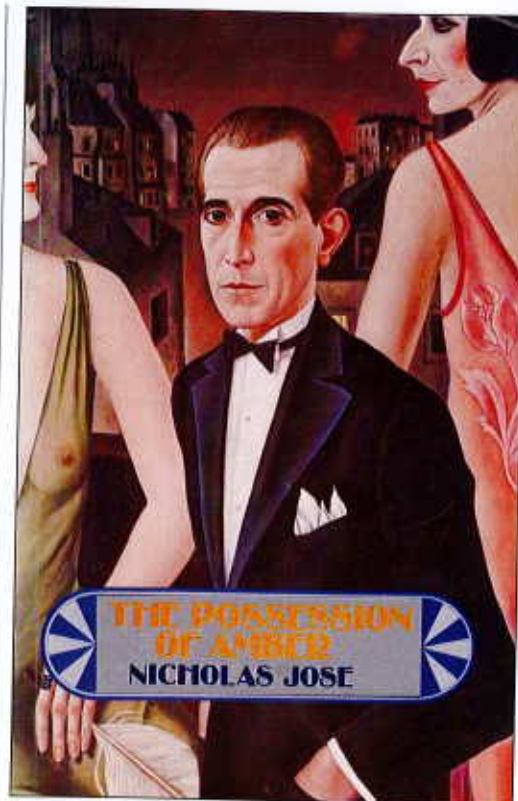
The wealth of a community's literary creation exists to be experienced, questioned, written over, as South Australian writers have done and will do, engaging with legacies of colonisation, settlement, dispossession; relations with and responsibility for country; inequity and justice, cultural change and future imaginings.

Ali Cobby Eckermann and Natalie Harkin are among contemporary First Nations poets in South Australia rewriting this world with knowledge, clarity and passionate eloquence. In her novel *Dyschronia* (2018), Jennifer Mills imagines near catastrophe in a coastal community visited by climate change and corporate predation.

In the work of all these writers, past and present, South Australia becomes the site of what writing can do to deepen understanding, express truths, arouse hope and fear and carry us forward.

Having lived and worked in China for a period and written fiction concerned with China and Chinese-Australian interactions over time, I have perhaps travelled further than most writers from Adelaide. But I have repeatedly returned to South Australia in my writing too.

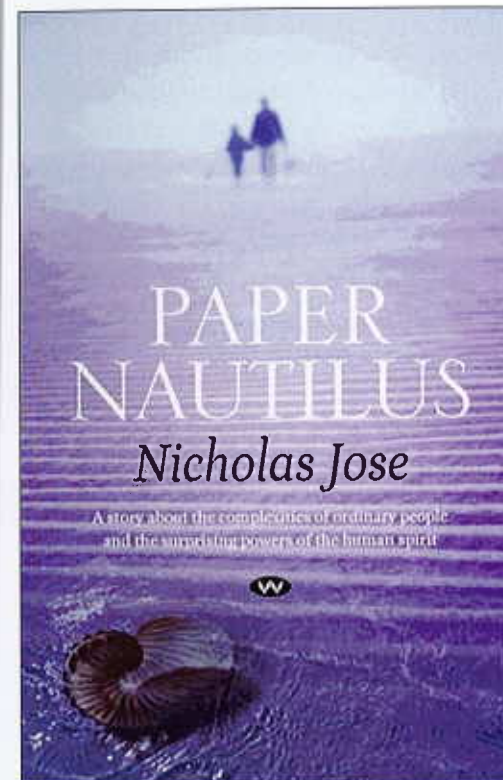
My first published work of fiction, *The Possession of Amber* (1980), contained stories set locally when that was still quite a rare thing. People were puzzled, wanting to know who the characters in the stories really were.



My first two novels, *Rowena's Field* (1984; reprinted in 2022 as part of the Untapped project) and *Paper Nautilus* (1987), were set largely in South Australia, on Yorke Peninsula, and in a later novel, *The Custodians* (1997), the narrative moves outward from Adelaide to Canberra, connecting as it goes with the Walls of China and a fictional version of Lake Mungo. History, deep time and the possibilities of change are part of what South Australia makes me think about as a writer; stories of people over generations, in place and through time. My writing is shaped by impulses of expanding out and circling back.

I think of what artist and art writer Stephanie Radok says of her Adelaide suburb in *Becoming a Bird* (2021):

In some ways it is hard to 'see' the past when walking around here; in other ways it is not hard at all... There are some wonderful trees ... including very old eucalyptus trees with strong presences. In the



morning the dog and I walk quietly into their healing scent. It is not hard to imagine these suburbs without the houses, roads, shops and electricity wires. ... 'We, the surviving Kaurna, must walk these spirit lands for our cultural strength.' I often think about what this means, and whether thoughtful walking by anyone might be a good way of getting to know these spirit lands.

Or thoughtful writing. It is unfinished business. There is always more to do.

Like many of us in my generation, I made the trip out of Adelaide in the 1970s and lived away for a long time. I was invited back by Tom Shapcott and Eva Hornung (then Sallis) in a scheme set up by ArtsSA to bring writers with a South Australian connection back to Adelaide for a short residency. Eva and I went to Port Lincoln to hold workshops with Eyre Writers. It was a treat, or a lure, intended to make me want to stay longer. It worked. I relocated in 2005, then left again (for a few years in Sydney and at Harvard) and returned again in 2008.

Eva wrote a novel inspired by swimming with lions at Port Lincoln, *The City of Sealions* (2002). My inspiration took a different form.

I see writing as emerging from community, from communities of writers, editors, publishers and readers, and as creating community, creating fellowship. Some communities are larger than others, of course, but all writing begins somewhere, at a grass roots level, prompted by everyday experiences and encounters. Writing, like reading, is available to all of us. It's local, yet it can bring with it all the stories and songs we carry, from near and far, all those things we've been told and that we can pass on.

There is an ecosystem to which everyone contributes. Books are notes, scraps, short articles, overheard snippets, half-remembered speeches or readings before they come together between covers and are given a spine that lets them stand on a shelf. That's how literature is made.

In this regard I am impressed by the statement recently put out by Reset Arts and Culture, a collaborative group of people representing the three universities and members of the arts and culture sector in South Australia, a group with whom the Friends of the State Library of South Australia have some affinity:

'So, let's get back to basics,' they say:

Art and culture are as essential to the flourishing of human life and society as health, education, and the material infrastructures of everyday life ... Let's talk about building communities around care, craft and culture.³

Reading, writing and making books are part of that. They happen here, in this community. As a writer in Adelaide I'm happy to hear that said and to recognise with gratitude what I am part of.



³ <https://resetartsandculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Reset-For-a-progressive-arts-and-cultural-policy-agenda-April-2022.pdf>