

**The Divided Self and the Social Environment: Barbara Hanrahan's
Autobiographical Novels and The House of Poppy Larkin**

By Robert Horne

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May 2012

The House of Poppy Larkin (Creative Work)

**The Divided Self and the Social Environment - Barbara
Hanrahan's Autobiographical Novels and The House of Poppy
Larkin (Exegesis)**

by Robert Horne

**This story cycle and exegesis are submitted together in
satisfaction of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts**

Discipline of English, School of Humanities

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May 2012

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Abstract

The social interaction of the city of Adelaide has always been fascinating to me. The place is not claustrophobic in the way a country town can be, but neither is there the anonymity of the big Australian cities; Adelaide is still a place where your past will usually catch up with you. It is also founded on the bedrock of class difference, a place where ‘they always ask you what school you went to.’ The pressures on people to be successful in this environment can be great, and the opportunities provided to persons of certain school backgrounds can be of critical importance. In my short story cycle *The House of Poppy Larkin* a visual artist from a lower middle class background implodes psychologically under his own lack of success. Even though Eoghan has some level of access to the ‘people who matter’ in his society, his pride leads him to decline these advantages and he deconstructs and fragments. Further, he subliminally pairs himself with characters who possess attributes he needs, and invents an underclass figure on whom to project his self-loathing and who takes him to the edge.

My story cycle uses Rundle Street as a microcosm of modern Adelaide to examine these issues of society and class; its fashion boutique present is contrasted with the artist’s world of nostalgia for the more diverse and bohemian feel of the area in the 1970s. This reflects global issues regarding the increasing uniformity of cities since the world franchising of businesses, and captures the alienating effect this has on some. But, ironically, when the artist’s obsessive psychological regression is used to gain success by adopting a marketable ‘mad artist’ persona, the artist is in a way joining the ethos of the glitzy Rundle Street present. The story cycle becomes a meditation on what it means to be successful as the creation of The Artist E. captures superficial media attention in this perverse, reality TV world, where authenticity and hard work are irrelevancies.

Following a review of literature relating to Adelaide, I have chosen to compare this situation to those portrayed in the four auto-biographical novels of Barbara Hanrahan. Her work provides strikingly similar starting points to my own, with her lower class artist heroines’ obsessions with class, opportunity and success. Hanrahan’s heroines too feel crushed under the weight of class

disadvantage. Like my artist they undergo personality fragmentation, constantly pairing themselves with 'important others'. The critical distinction is that Hanrahan's artists achieve success, both professional and personal, through a *Girls' Own Annual* approach of unfailing hard work and constructive, focused ambition. Her novels caused me to reflect on the nature of my own project. Like my modern anti-hero, Hanrahan's heroines can only be whole as persons once success has been achieved, but their way of achieving it is a reflection of the ethos of the 1950s and 60s and can be contrasted sharply with the superficial manipulations which project my man to prominence. The project therefore becomes a reflection on the changes in Western society, which also reflect the transformation of Rundle Street. In not much more than a generation warped and superficial media manipulation have come to succeed over talent and persistence. The world of the Hanrahan heroines has passed and The Artist E. is king.

Declaration

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