

**REWRITING URBAN NARRATIVES OF THE  
AUSTRALIAN GREAT DEPRESSION**

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September 2014

**VOLUME 2**

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### **VOLUME TWO**

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## Introduction

In his controversial 2006 history *The Myth of the Great Depression*, author David Potts asserts that the prevailing story of the Australian Great Depression acts as a moral tale reinforcing “ideals of industriousness and of an individual’s happiness as stemming from material security and increasing affluence” (4). Potts goes on to interrogate perceptions of the Depression as a time of unremitting, widespread suffering.

But Potts is also forced to acknowledge the provocative nature of his argument, noting in the book’s conclusion the case of a student accusing him of “betraying the working class” (325). A lifetime after the Depression, an informed thesis can still provoke an emotional response in people who did not themselves live through the event. At the same time, as we shall see, despite the proliferation of published narratives of the Depression, the reality of the experience as it was lived, and its lasting lesson – what, in effect, it all meant – proves elusive.

Why do we want or need to remember the past? In his 2010 overview of theoretical approaches to the historical novel, Jerome de Groot proposes that the importance of the historical novel is rooted in Georg Lukács’ concept, after Hegel, of history as process. From this perspective, “an awareness that the events of history have an impact upon the contemporary...has profound consequences for the way we live our lives and conceive of ourselves” (de Groot 27).

This in turn raises another question which must be examined alongside it: *how* do we remember the past? Those among us who experienced anything of the Depression first-hand are, in 2014, dwindling in number. It’s only a matter of years before our cultural memory of it is a matter of record alone. Records can take the form of ephemera and various kinds of cultural objects, but this thesis looks to different types of narrative records. Historiography draws upon documents, including those that are both publicly and privately

held. Oral history draws on memory and is often personal in nature. Lastly, fiction draws on both of these, but is free to weave imagination into the gaps between so-called “facts”.

Novelist and critic Margaret Atwood asks, in an essay on the historical novel: “What does the past tell us? In and of itself, it tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word, and, even so, listening means telling, and then re-telling” (1515). Crucially, unlike the events of the past, narratives about them are forever open to revision, due to the inherently mediated nature of the enterprise of history-writing. This study applies a definition of the historical novel taken from the aforementioned Atwood essay, one which is now widely recognised: a fiction written by someone who did not him or herself consciously experience the historical period about which he or she is writing (1510). It is a useful definition here because it allows for the categorical separation of narratives informed by personal experience and connection and those which are entirely mediated by the narratives of others. The question of authority is not only a central concern in revisionist historiographies of the Depression; it also underpins those interrogative approaches to the idea of historical “truth” which make the contemporary literary historical novel a characteristically influential mode of resistance to dominant cultural narratives.

Postmodern theorists and novelists have queried both the Enlightenment idea of progress that is the foundation of Lukács view of “history as the concrete precondition of the present” (Lukács 21) and the ideological implications of ordering historical events into narratives structured around cause and effect. But later developments in the historical novel, such as historiographic metafiction and the less radical literary form that followed it, are still centrally concerned with the notion of historicity that has informed historical fiction since the early nineteenth century. The historical novel as a “maker of history” (Butterfield 42) is understood to enable a particular kind of imaginative understanding of the past with implications for the present, and as separate from and at the same time complementary to traditional

historiography.

Do we “make history” or does history make us? The writing of history, whether nominally *fictional* or *nonfictional*, is one mode of making; but those narratives in turn have been utilised in key ways in the formation of national identity (de Groot 94). Taken as a whole, our telling of the Australian Great Depression has its own narrative, beginning in the 1930s. Following a period of post-war forgetting, a resurgence of interest and revival of memory in the 1980s marked an attempt at that time to reclaim, and to redress historical record with, the unspoken histories of the “ordinary Australians” who suffered the worst of its effects. Finally, we arrive at a chequered and somehow insubstantial mode of contemporary fictional enquiry in which individual authors can be seen to promote their own ideologies. It is by surveying the available historiographic and fictional narratives about the Australian Great Depression that we can begin to answer these linked questions of *how* and *why* we remember the past, and to move beyond them, towards forming some sense of how each narrative mode – and indeed, individual texts within each mode – is enlisted towards either legitimating or interrogating perspectives on the events themselves. In this sense, the Depression can be seen as a kind of historical metanarrative, which is articulated, formed, disseminated and reinforced by actual narratives.

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The creative component of this thesis, an historical novel entitled *Dadaville*, is set in Sydney in 1931 against the drama of the anti-eviction movement, the shanty towns on the city’s fringe, and the avant-garde art scene.

The 1930s was a tumultuous decade. In Australia, as across the world, people struggled with the catastrophic effects of the 1929 stock market crash, as well as the escalating struggle between extreme left and right political ideologies. While the exact temporal setting is never specified in the novel itself, *Dadaville* is set in 1931 for two reasons.

Firstly, 1931 was the year of greatest privation and instability for the

newly jobless. Australia was one of the countries worst affected by the 1929 stock market crash (Cannon 16); the decline of many working and middle class families into poverty was shocking in its rapidity, and the evidence was soon seen and felt, as shanty towns – known as dole camps – mushroomed in and around urban centres across the country (Cannon 49-60). In 1931, many were feeling the effects of long-term unemployment, including widespread evictions from their homes (Cannon 38-40), but the more organised charitable and welfare systems of 1932 and beyond did not yet exist (Cannon 92). Significantly, there was no housing relief of any kind; the available dole was issued as food rations, and charitable organisations offered only food and clothes. Some hostels for homeless single men and women existed, but these were of no assistance to the scores of families who found themselves on the street following non-payment of rent or mortgages (Cannon 61-76).

Secondly, the anti-eviction movement reached its peak in that year, before being stifled by increased police intervention. An initiative of members of the Unemployed Workers Movement – a kind of trade union of the jobless – its success and, ultimately, its violence, was popularly viewed as the visible manifestation of the revolutionary feeling gaining ground across the country; although Nadia Wheatley, one of the primary scholars of the anti-eviction campaign, asserts that it is more accurate to characterise it as “a brilliant, comparatively successful, issue-oriented, ephemeral protest movement” (“Meeting them at the door” 229). Nevertheless, the movement did contain leftist radicals inspired by socialist fervour elsewhere in the world, who argued that the Depression was evidence that the capitalist system had failed; they felt that the moment had come to overthrow the old system and build something entirely new in its place. (Cannon 171)

Street protests and rallies were commonplace during this time; speakers took their socialist politics to street corners in slums and working class areas, and published and distributed newsletters and pamphlets. The New Guard in New South Wales and similar organisations elsewhere formed in response to growing popular support for the left protest movement. Made up of thousands

of volunteers, the New Guard was a highly structured, underground, right-wing people's army prepared to seize control of essential services in the event of a Communist uprising (Cannon 195-208).

Australia in the early 1930s, then, was not only a country in deep financial crisis but one which appeared to many of its citizens to be on the brink of seismic social and political upheaval. As we shall see, contemporary narratives engage quite variously with this well-documented ideological struggle, as well as acknowledging their own political subjectivity to differing degrees.

This conscious or unconscious subjectivity is a central preoccupation of this thesis. If the past is a lens through which we seek to view and understand our contemporary selves and culture, the question of which accounts of the past are authorised becomes essential. Chapter one examines select historiographies of the Australian Great Depression with attention to the ways in which the revisionism of the late 1970s and beyond reflects a contemporary evaluation of "History" as subjective, constructed and ideologically positioned, comparing historians' interpretations of their research to examine how and why the Depression is contested history and its role in our national story.

By exploiting its elastic relationship with the so-called historical "truth", historical fiction might also contest history in similar ways: by, for example, considering the articulation of national identity through stories about the past, including marginal voices, or emphasising in other ways the subjectivity inherent in accounts of the past (de Groot 2). In their attempts to fictionalise the Depression, novelists can be seen to tussle over much of the same ground as historians, seeking reparation, a moral lesson, or the last word on our national identity. Chapter three surveys historical fictions about the Australian Great Depression that fit Atwood's definition; it also seeks to break these usefully into sub-categories which might illuminate how various, how blatant, or how subtle our mythologising processes about this period in history can be.

Chapter two considers how theories of narrativisation offer another approach to understanding the complex and symbiotic relationship between

historiography and historical fiction. Theorists such as Hayden White have argued that, despite nineteenth century efforts to separate the enterprise of history-writing from imaginative literary forms, the narrative conventions of historiography make such a distinction impossible. The extent to which contemporary readers then receive historical fiction as a version of the historical “truth” raises questions about authority, authenticity, and how we collectively perceive the availability of the past. It also directs us to examine what motivates the continued use of realism in the form, even while it has absorbed certain postmodern techniques into its popular literary form and even neutralised, to some extent, their political effect (de Groot 98-100). Roland Barthes draws our attention to the paradox of narrative structure in historiography, which, he argues, employs narrative tropes “originally developed in the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics)” (155) to create the “reality effect” (154). If, as Barthes argues, “[o]ur whole civilization is drawn to the reality effect” (154), then the implications of acknowledging this paradox are significant: “Reality is nothing but a meaning, and so can be changed to meet the needs of history, when history demands the subversion of the foundations of civilization.” (155)

If an accepted account of the past functions as a grand narrative underpinning ideas of nationhood, then resisting such a narrative can be powerful and transformative; in this mode, historical fiction has the capacity to “underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention” (de Groot 2). It is in this spirit that the art movement Dada is invoked. Chapter four discusses the development of the creative work and the symbolism of the Max Ernst painting “Dadaville”, after which the novel is named. Created around 1924, “Dadaville” dates from the transitional period between the artist’s involvement with the Dada and Surrealist movements (Tate Galleries website). It is visually suggestive of the shanty town, but my novel also borrows meaning from the context of its making. Dada sought, early in the twentieth century and decades before postmodernism, to interrogate grand narratives of nationhood,



imperialism and other power structures including the venerated institution of Art (Elger 8-9). The act of tangible remaking that lies at the heart of Dada and Surrealist art practice produces works that trouble and displace the meaning of objects and resist aesthetic interpretations (Lloyd xi). The novel *Dadaville* suggests a symbolic correlation between this kind of art and the acts of repurposing, recycling and remaking that enabled many people to survive the Depression years, presenting the shanty town or dole camp as the ultimate manifestation of this. Constructed from whatever materials can be scavenged, and yet built to resemble the suburbia from which its residents have been banished, the dole camp, simultaneously accidental and purposeful, is renamed “Dadaville”. In the protagonist Maxine’s horror and rejection of it – in her choice of homelessness and uncertainty over the provisional shelter it offers – the novel resists the urge to assign a closed meaning to the events through which she has lived. As historical fiction, *Dadaville* hopes to present a narrative of resistance to Australia’s dominant cultural story of the Depression years, not by offering another myth in its place, but by depicting the past as “moving substance” rather than a “formed whole” (Williams 128).

## 1. Historiographies of the Australian Great Depression

In a 2005 essay on her theory of metahistorical romance, Amy Elias suggests that the historical fiction of any period reflects the historiographical debates alive at the time; therefore, she argues, post-1960s historical novels can be said to reflect “the postmodern turn on history” (“Metahistorical Romance” 163). In order to assign meanings to historical fictions about the Australian Great Depression, it’s useful to read the historiographies that inform them in this light. While historiography has traditionally laid claim to objective representations of historical “truth”, postmodern historiographic theory instead recognises it as a series of subjective, ideologically positioned accounts of the past, which can never encompass the totality of history. The study of history, according to this view, is not the study of past events but the study of discourses about them. The implication – that history can be represented, but not known in the sense that an incontrovertible “fact” is known — underpins a variety of critical approaches to an understanding of history as a mediated, predominantly literary enterprise. This chapter will begin to investigate these approaches in more detail, as it explores the ways in which different Depression historiographies offer, on the one hand, individual messages about the meaning of it as an event, but also interact to create the mythology that we call history.

In his succinct 1992 overview of contemporary historiographic theory, *Re-thinking History*, Keith Jenkins examines the cultural climate in which the postmodern view of history emerged and what its implications might be. The scepticism of this late twentieth-century view is founded on the acknowledgement that histories are not only *by* someone but always *for* someone: “History is one of a series of discourses about the world. These discourses do not create the world but they do appropriate it and give it all the meanings it has” (Jenkins 5).

Jenkins outlines several reasons for history’s epistemological fragility. Firstly, the scope of history – the sheer number of events it contains and the fact

that most events leave no documented traces – precludes any historian from producing a full account of it. Secondly, although we form accounts of the past, the past itself was not an account, but a series of events. We cannot check an account against the past, only against other accounts. Thirdly, historiography is an account of the past mediated by an historian, whose interpretations of the past (and ours) are informed by the cultural moment in which they are read. Finally, we are often able, after the fact, to gather and organise information about the past in a way that provides us with insights that were unavailable to the people living through the events in question; historic events can therefore be recounted more cohesively than they are experienced. (11-13)

Most significantly for this study, Jenkins looks at historiography as a legitimating narrative for ideologies on a dominant/marginal spectrum. To claim a “central” or “balanced” perspective – common practice for historians who adhere to a traditional model of disciplinary values – is to claim the power to marginalise alternative perspectives. But if, instead, *any* perspective is in fact an “historiographically constructed” position, the authority of historians laying claim to the so-called objective centre is undermined (34-36).

This is demonstrated by the conflicting agendas of selected historians writing about the Great Depression in Australia from 1980 onwards.

Wendy Lowenstein’s 1981 *Weevils in the Flour* is made up of oral histories collected during the 1970s. In her preface, Lowenstein states her particular interest in the Depression’s “victims” or “losers”, whom she defines as “the working people” (Lowenstein *xiii*). Theirs was the greatest suffering of all, she argues, because of their lack of reserves or influential connections and opportunities; the system worked against them. She claims that despite the suffering described in *Weevils*, “all the evidence shows that [the Depression] was far worse than these accounts reveal. I missed much because I came along forty years later, when the survivors had put the worst behind them, preferring to remember the better times, the kindnesses rather than the betrayals” (*xiv*).

Lowenstein sees oral history as a form of redress, an answer to those historiographies written by “winners” (*xiv*). It’s a sentiment echoed by Keith

Smith in his 2003 collection of oral accounts, *Aussie Battlers Remember: The Great Depression*. In this case the book's title offers the first clue to Smith's agenda. In emotive language, he dismisses the relevance to the "ordinary battlers" – who are the subject of the book, and in his eyes distinct from those in charge of the system that let them down — of "lofty" political or economic explanations for the Depression (1-2).

The aims of these two histories go beyond redress; both Lowenstein and Smith see in the stories of the past a clue to the very nature of Australian national identity. In the case of Smith, the conclusions he draws are positive and uncontroversial:

...as this narrative illustrates...the traditional ability of Australians to innovate and survive against heavy odds proved itself again and again; as did their constant willingness to share the little they might have left with others who had nothing at all.

If...this country suffered another Depression as bad as the first, would it be reasonable to assume that Australians would handle it with the same common sense and lack of panic that they did before?

One feels confident that they would. (215-6)

Lowenstein, however, arrives through the same process as Smith at a far less comforting interpretation of both the attitudes of the 1930s and their translation into the present. She observes that:

...the dole bludger myth has never been more prevalent. Today one understands, at last, the intolerance of the 1930s. People were afraid to face the truth....

Today, as then, the victims are blamed for being victims, and sometimes even blame each other...

Despite their common predicament the unemployed in the thirties tended to fall apart rather than to come together to help each other. Although there was much kindness and much generosity, the poverty, the isolation, tension, worry and fear did not make people better and kinder. (427-8)

However, there is no shortage of agreement with Smith's more nostalgic view among those publishing personal accounts of the Depression years. In his 1999 collection of oral histories, *Life's Been Good*, which focusses exclusively on memories of Depression-era childhoods, Glen McLaren begins by stating

that as a child he:

always felt very comfortable in the company of those older people who lived through the Depression...the unassuming and warm relatives and friends of my parents who took the time to treat me with kindness and courtesy, and gave me an ever-present sense of order and stability. In those days adults, it seemed, did not divorce, abuse others in public or behave indecorously...overall, compared to their fathers, and indeed to the baby boomers [of which the author is one] and the current generation, this was a kind, considerate and socially cohesive generation. (8)

The idea that the events and experiences of the past, in particular the interwar years, were culturally formative, and that in studying them we might gain some insight into our current cultural identity, is also embraced by the 2013 ABC documentary *The Years That Made Us*. This three-part series about Australia during the period from 1919 to 1940 claims to “[debunk] the myth that the Australian nation was forged at Gallipoli: it was what we did next that still defines who we are” (ABC website).

In episode two, which focusses on the years 1929-1933, Australia is depicted as a nation “on the brink” of civil war, in the grips of a political crisis brought about by the gathering forces of Communism and Fascism. Journalist Chris Masters honours the “quiet bravery of Australians who in the most punishing times rescued and remade Australia.” These so-called ordinary heroes rescued Australia, it’s implied, from the threat of revolution, among other things.

There is ample evidence to show that material support for extreme left and right political factions grew to an all-time high during the Depression years in Australia, an unsurprising fact given the economic conditions of the time and the political climate elsewhere in the world. The contradictions arise in historians’ accounts for why these radical movements ultimately failed. Masters’ “quiet bravery” is not seen the same way by Lowenstein, who instead suggests:

Social conservatism comes with fear. The depression was not a time for experimenting with new ways of life. Like the overwhelming majority today, the unemployed did not then reject the values of society, but were

only too anxious to reinstate themselves in the society which had rejected them. (428)

Into this fray steps David Potts, who takes pains to acknowledge the intricate complexities of historiography's subjectivity in his 2006 book, *The Myth of the Great Depression*. Potts describes how his own life experiences, first as an impoverished child during the Depression under the influence of a Marxist father who worked without pay for a Communist newspaper, and later as a factory worker, student, teacher and traveller in the developing world, led him "to reconsider long-held assumptions and directions in traditional histories of the period", which "refer almost exclusively to painful events" (4).

However, Potts comes armed with his own agenda, as the title of his controversial history attests. "Popular myth reflects and sustains dominant community values" he argues, and the myth at work in the patterns of meaning we assign to the Great Depression in Australia "is underpinned by an assumption that loss of work and income necessarily led to widespread trauma" (13). In the service of this myth, he argues, we have downplayed positive aspects of the Depression and focussed on the extremes of poverty experienced by a minority, creating a distorted collective view of the Depression years in which extreme suffering was far more widespread than records indicate (332).

According to Potts, "[r]esponses to the Great Depression in Australia were far more complex than the traditional story allows" (327), and he pits his own work against both traditional histories and the work of oral historians like Lowenstein, by suggesting that the extent to which people suffered their reduced circumstances during the Depression was dependent on individual temperament and circumstance. While he is anxious to acknowledge the real "suffering of the minority who lived on the cutting edge of Depression pain" (331), he questions the authenticity and reliability of memory and inherited perceptions, and seeks to expose ways in which accounts of the era are inconsistent with statistics, or distorted by personal bias, poor memory, the need for hyperbole, political agendas, and the dominant values of the 1930s and beyond regarding work, respectability, material wealth and happiness.

Here it's worth noting two more histories that interrogate what their authors saw as a perception that suffering was so widespread as to be more or less universal. Two studies, Andrew Cottle's 1998 study of the rich of Woollahra from 1928-1934, and Jean Rogers' 1984 study of Adelaide's wealthiest class, have attempted to balance a perceived bias towards labour histories of the Depression, and have shown that lives of wealth and privilege in Sydney and Adelaide continued unaffected for the social elite.

All of these books are representative of a body of work that emerged since the early 1980s responding to a revived interest in the Australian Great Depression, notable for the force of their insistence that history needed to be revised, most often to include the "lost" voices of those who suffered the worst poverty. They responded to a general post-everything trend to revise history in this way, but those seeking to reinstate the voices of the unemployed who suffered can also be seen to respond to the economic conditions in Australia at the time. Lowenstein's 1981 note on her collection refers to the necessity of revisiting our attitudes towards unemployment and social inequality at a time of deepening recession. In an introduction to Linda McLean's 1981 memoir of her family's struggles, *Pumpkin Pie and Faded Sandshoes*, Len Fox contextualises the story as "necessary" at a time when "outsiders" are buying up Australian resources and manufacturing, because "it gives one a better understanding of what it means to be an Australian." (McLean xi)

Those who authored memoirs or collections of oral history appeal to the authority of the personal, pitting everyday experiences of the Depression against the "official" view enshrined in public record. Michael Cannon's *The Human Face of the Great Depression* speaks to this impulse. An historiography which grounds itself in some of the same sentiment as the collections of oral histories already discussed here, its title signposts the author's intention to convey a perspective on historical events that he perceives to be lacking in historiographies that focus only on public life, statistics and the politics of the era: "The main text is a personal interpretation of the known facts, in which I have tried hard not to be too angry" (Cannon 3). While it does function as a

contextualising overview of the socio-political forces at work during the Depression, it is presented in a personal, left-leaning tone sympathetic to the unemployed who suffered; the author seeks to outline the failures and conflicts within the broader political system, as well as depict the impact on individuals and families of the time, and includes a selection of “memories” — brief, personal accounts of the Depression years — as a coda. Cannon is another historian who explicitly confronts the potential unreliability of historical accounts:

There are private lies, government lies, and official statistics of unemployment during the Great Depression. These figures, often swallowed like so much soothing syrup, purport to show that even at the worst times, ‘only’ about one-third of the Australian work force lost jobs. Such statistics are, without exception, as false as a confidence trickster’s title deed to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. (15)

But neither approach offers the totality of history or a more knowable past. Lowenstein asks of the history presented in *Weevils*:

Is it ‘true’? The question is academic. There are many truths, and the truths of the poor are not the truths of the rich. The voices of the past are no less true than written records....Informants are not on oath, but neither are clerks, newspaper reporters or politicians. (xiv-xv)

Like Potts, she acknowledges the unreliability of oral history, even as she reaches different conclusions about the impact of that on our understanding of the Depression as an historical event, concluding simply that “people do not talk about their deepest hurts. Too often the unemployed blamed themselves rather than society for what they saw as their failures” (xiv).

That the Great Depression happened in Australia is not disputed. However, as history it is not a fixed entity, and the ease with which it can be re-written suggests that the idea of pinning down any kind of historical “truth” is a fallacy. Yet, as these books show, we persist in making claims to historical truth, even as we interrogate preceding narratives. In *The Years That Made Us*, Masters claims to “debunk” what he sees as the prevailing myth of Gallipoli as a formative moment in the forging of Australian identity. But in making such a



claim, he suggests that he has access to an alternative – that is, *objective* truth about the matter – when all he can really offer is a replacement myth of his own devising, one which reflects his personal interpretation of the events of the era and values about “Australianness”. In the early twenty-first century, an era in which one could argue that the dream of “middle Australia” is more alive than ever, Masters’ documentary could be read as an unashamedly Anglo-centric celebration of suburban entitlement and the triumph of conservatism over innovation. And although making a very different argument to Masters, and despite also interrogating the mythologising forces at work in Depression historiography, Potts ultimately aspires to a knowable past, one that can be located with a sufficiently critical eye, or by looking in the right places.

Perhaps this failure of revisionist histories to acknowledge their ongoing subjectivity – the possibility that they may themselves come in for revision – can be seen as the result of what Raymond Williams calls “the habitual past tense”: the overwhelmingly dominant cultural procedure of converting “experience into finished products...formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes” (128).

## 2. Narrative, fiction, metahistory

If historiography reflects the fact that Australia's Great Depression history is contested ground, historical fiction further complicates the debate. Margaret Atwood acknowledges that the subjectivity of the historical record presents just as much a problem for researchers of historical fiction as for historians. Echoing Lowenstein's note on *Weevils*, she writes: "There is...no more reason to trust something written down on paper than as there is now. After all, the writers-down were human beings, and are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases" (1514).

This might not present a problem if historical fiction continued in the present day to be seen as a very separate enterprise to historiography. But the late-twentieth century boom in literary historical fiction is seen by many novelists and academics to speak very clearly to the postmodern historiographic zeitgeist and its preoccupation with interrogating grand narratives and dismantling traditional nodes of power. De Groot identifies Australia as a place where "[h]istorical novelists have long been interested in the discussion of nation creation...the substantiation of a sense of national identity has been part of the historical writer's purpose and mode of working. However, such writing has equally been concerned with the destruction, querying or troubling of the foundational myths of history" (140).

Atwood characterises the postcolonial historical novel as emerging out of curiosity over what is forgotten, unmentioned or unmentionable within a culture (1511). It's a view echoed by critic Geordie Williamson in *The Burning Library*, his impassioned foray into the forgotten corners of Australia's literary tradition, in which he suggests that Australia's neglect today of those who might be its canonical authors constitutes a metaphorical turning away from the inland, which "we associate...with negative, destructive and tragic aspects of our history... . In our urbanised imaginations it is the site of environmental

degradation and violent appropriation: the junkyard of our failures as a settler culture” (2).

But even while a colonial project such as ours was in its infancy, novelists such as Gustave Flaubert and Leo Tolstoy saw in their historical fictions the possibility of transcending the novel form to stage “experiments and crucial interventions in important cultural debates” in an effort to “explore new ideological positions” (de Groot 2-3).

If we accept this assertion, we can enter those choppy waters in which literary historical fiction is taken widely by its readers and by some authors and academics to contribute to historical understanding, or as a mode of legitimate historical enquiry. It’s not an idea with which everyone vested in it feels comfortable, as Inga Clendinnen’s stoush with Kate Grenville over her historical novel *The Secret River* has shown. In 2006, historian Clendinnen expressed outrage that a novelist such as Grenville should count her work, which takes imaginative liberties with the past, as equal or superior to that of historians (16-28). Grenville responded by defending herself from ever having made such a claim (66); in that, the argument itself became somewhat futile, but it is worth noting here for the level of disquiet that the alleged misunderstanding created amongst those who recognise that the stories that we tell about our collective past have meaning in the present. Clendinnen wrote her essay at a moment when the Howard government sought, actively and explicitly, to enlist history in the services of a unifying national story with a conservative political agenda (Clendinnen 2).

Criticism of the historical novel’s freedom to play with fact necessarily assumes a truth/fiction line; over the last several decades, however, many theorists have queried the validity of separating history writing from any kind of imaginative writing. Rather, partly due to its use of narrative to order and interpret data about the past, they see historiography as inherently fictive: a solely linguistic construct. Furthermore, critics such as Lukács, Fernand Braudel, Barthes and Hayden White have debated since the interwar years whether narrative itself is an inherently ideological discourse: whether the

employment of historical events assigns a meaning to them separate to the *content* of the narrative, or the events depicted (White, *Fiction of Narrative*, 273-92). In turn, we shall see how these questions have given rise to a “crisis of representation that postmodern historical novelists have manipulated ...provid[ing] them with a set of tools for challenging legitimating narratives and locating radical dissent” (de Groot 112).

Hayden White has written extensively on the tropological function of narrative in historiography. In an essay entitled “The Discourse of History”, White debates the literariness of historiography, demonstrating how a nineteenth century “passion for the real” (a phrase he borrows from Roland Barthes) resulted in a denial of “the literariness” of historians’ discourse. The nineteenth century saw a “fundamental transformation”, after which literature came to be seen as separate from discourse, as mysterious and something that “undermines the ideal of clarity, the dream of perfect correspondence between language and the world.” In this view, historiography became more aligned with the sciences, not because historians thought it scientific, but because they wanted to disengage it from fiction, which “implicitly undermined any claim to a linguistically innocent discourse.” Literature problematized narrative for historians, by undermining the narrator’s authority ( *Fiction of Narrative* 188-190).

The alignment of history with the sciences necessitated a wholesale rejection of any relationship between written history and fictional or imaginary modes of writing. Most significantly, according to White:

[i]t has resulted in the repression of the *conceptual apparatus* (without which atomic facts cannot be aggregated into complex macrostructures and constituted as objects of discursive representation in a historical narrative) and the remission of the *poetic moment* in historical writing to the interior of the discourse (where it functions as an unacknowledged – and therefore uncriticizable – *content* of the historical narrative). (*Tropics of Discourse* 126-7)

This failure to acknowledge the relationship of “story” to “fact” in historical writing is one to which White and other theorists and novelists have

turned their attention since the 1960s, culminating in the 1980s and 1990s and beyond in a visible proliferation of both revisionist historiographies and historical fictions seeking to emphasise History's subjectivity. If historians aim to be more than chroniclers, it lies at the heart of what Jenkins calls "the problematic, as historians transform the events of the past into patterns of meaning, that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce" (33).

White's work builds on that of Barthes, who, in a 1967 essay on the semiotics of historical discourse, questions the validity of the practice of contrasting fictional and historical narratives. As discourse, he argues, historiography can only signify reality; therefore, historiography is evidence only of the historian's assertion that events happened, not evidence that the events in question actually did happen (Barthes 154-155). Jenkins concurs: "If history is interpretation, if history is historians' work(s), then *historiography* is what the 'proper' study of history is actually about" (34) (my emphasis).

History as it is told and written, therefore, is a sophisticated narrative form that borrows its authority not from the historical facts it presents, but from a form that makes no claims to truth. Conversely, we are mistaken, argues Raymond Williams, when we deform our definitions of "creativity" and of the "imaginative" in order to claim that their complex, speculative function applies only to fiction (148).

The scholarly work of historian and historical novelist Richard Slotkin has focused on the processes of transforming historical experience into national myth, and the ways in which such myths inform political projects in the present. We have already noted Barthes' assertion that "[r]eality is nothing but a meaning" and therefore malleable, with profound destabilising consequences for "the foundations of civilisation" (155). In a 2005 essay entitled "Fiction for the Purposes of History", Slotkin echoes Barthes' sentiment: "As myths evolve through historical circumstance, those who use them adapt their terms to new circumstances" (229).

Slotkin describes mythmaking as a continuous process which is

fundamental to cultural cohesion, and emphasises that analysis cannot displace mythmaking, that a myth can only ever be replaced with another myth (230). But, he asks, “must all narratives, all historical myths, necessarily be *master* narratives, or myths that affirm the ideology of a dominant class?” (228)

In answering this question, the essay argues eloquently for the novel as an adjunct to historiography. If one accepts that all history writing is an imaginative construct, then it follows that a properly researched novel could present an account of the past equal to, or better than, an historiographic one. By the beginning of the twentieth century the instructional value of the historical novel had been recognised, even for adults (de Groot 48) although the educational function of the form for children had been acknowledged much earlier (de Groot 88).

De Groot suggests that the historical novel “is obsessed with pointing out its own partiality, with introducing other voices and undermining its authority” (8). He points to the author’s note, ubiquitous in the historical novel, as evidence of writers’ desire both to make truth claims for the work in question at the same time as distancing themselves from the expectation of total veracity. The anxiety inherent in this kind of paratextual commentary can be read as recognition of readers’ continued preparedness to assume the work will have some kind of edifying function – that an historical novel might be a legitimate place to learn about “real” history – even if they are prepared to collude, consciously or subconsciously, with a certain amount of deception.

This means that a reader might approach a novel like *Dadaville* under the assumption that it will impart some reliable historical knowledge. Certainly, *Dadaville* contains many facts of the kind that can be found in the historiographic record. I aimed to ensure that – unconscious errors notwithstanding – none of the material realities of the characters’ lives are anachronistic. In one sense, then, *Dadaville* could be said to impart some idea of what it was like to be unemployed and destitute in Sydney in 1931.

However, as with much non-fiction, fictional accounts of the past according to our working definition are entirely mediated by people who bring

to the act of story-telling their own agendas. Upon re-reading the draft manuscript of *Dadaville* for the first time, and recognising the source and inspiration for its myriad references and re-tellings, I became acutely aware that it is made out of nothing but other people's stories about a time and event that I can never know first-hand. We might call this *historiographic intertextuality*: some scenes and incidents in *Dadaville* are drawn directly from oral accounts of the time. For example, the scene in chapter fourteen which describes the sinking of a boat overloaded with stolen coal is based closely on an anecdote which appeared in Keith Smith's collection of oral history, *Aussie Battlers Remember: The Great Depression*. Innumerable other minor historical details, many of which are repeated throughout accounts of life during the Depression, are lifted or repurposed from those historiographic texts.

My research into the history of the era was meticulous – up to a point. In a fictional narrative seeking to evoke the past as a real event or place, there comes a point where the author might depart from the “facts” as they stand and bend them to create something that is *plausible* enough. Of course it is up to the author how much bending, how much plausibility, and readers will not know, unless they are keen students of that period in history, or unless the author tells them, in some overt, metafictional way, when they are being hoodwinked.

If cultural expectations of historiography and the novel continue to differ, argues Slotkin, the historical novel's possibilities can be put to use in complementary ways. A novel can encompass an understanding of the past which the historian may have, but which lies beyond what he or she can prove within the confines of acceptable historiographic discourse. As such, the historical novel can act as a “simulacrum” of the world of the past, a speculative “thought-experiment” wherein historical hypotheses can be rigorously tested out by writers of fiction who have researched meticulously. Moreover, it can offer meanings less laboriously obtained than through historiographic argument. As early as 1908, critic Ernest Baker expressed a similar view: “Historical fiction is not history, but it is often better than history ... may easily teach more and carry a deeper impression than whole chapters of

description and analysis...” (viii). It’s worth noting that Baker’s arguments in support of this assertion foreshadow those that certain postmodern critics would make decades later. Historical fiction, he argues:

is as sincere and valid reconstruction as the best efforts of the serious historian, and much the same methods are employed. Neither can possibly be more than an approximation to the reality; neither can help us to anything but a partial realization of the past which is no more. (viii)

However, as the altercation between Clendinnen and Grenville has shown, it’s essential to underline the difference between what the novel and historiography can achieve. Novelist Delia Falconer warns:

Reading history is seductive: its minutiae are often stranger than fiction, while the ‘fullness’ and abundance of the past can seem richer than one’s own inventions. It is easy to forget that historical novels are *not* history, ...that, as Milan Kundera puts it “the sole *raison d’etre* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover.” (108)

However, to insist on the continued separation of historical fiction and historiography – to dismiss the novel’s contribution to those narratives which collect into our understanding of the past – would be disingenuous, and even belie a disavowal of the entire postmodern project. There is more dynamic potential in recognising, as Slotkin suggests, “that the forms and genres of culture, including narrative, are not a set of conceptual restraints but potentially a set of tools or instruments for dealing with a changing and troublesome reality” (229).

Postmodern historiographic fiction emerged in the 1960s to challenge grand narratives about the past, in particular, the nineteenth century and Enlightenment values that underpinned the age of Empire, that whole body of history that culminated in the ideological upheavals of the early twentieth century and the global horror of WWII. But it did not simply seek to re-write history, by, for example, incorporating previously marginalised voices in feminist and postcolonial reimaginings of the past. Its mode – nihilistic, schizophrenic – sought to question the reliability of memory in all its



manifestations, the so-called “illusion of realism” (Jenkins 35), and the very legitimacy of narrativisation (de Groot 110-115).

Historical fiction, as this thesis has come to define it, then proliferated from the late 1980s as a bourgeois literary form which borrows much from the postmodern experimentation that precedes it, but, in its most popular form, in less overtly radical and political ways. Metafictional techniques have been absorbed into the literary mainstream, becoming fundamental to the way in which contemporary fiction approaches history, even if the works produced are less demanding and radical than the novels from which those techniques have been appropriated (de Groot 98-99). According to Amy Elias, this trend is enshrined in a novel form she terms the “metahistorical romance”, a development of postmodern historiographic metafiction as defined by Linda Hutcheon. Elias identifies a late twentieth/early twenty-first century incarnation of the historical novel that rejects the binary of postmodern nihilism versus the traditional conception of History in favour of acknowledging two things simultaneously: the continued, human yearning for history *and* a lack of faith in available historical truth or knowability. The historical novel has a dialogic relationship with history, even though – since history cannot answer – it is a one-sided conversation, and one whose meaning will never be finalised. Elias explains:

Postmodern literature...seems hyperconsciously aware that the drive to write and know history may be a futile endeavour, at worst an imperialist drive to control the past, at most a Hollywood-inspired move to profit from History’s revision and simulation. ...[W]hat is left to postmodernists in this between-state of belief is only ‘metahistory,’ the ability to theorize and ironically desire history rather than access it through discovery and reconstruction. (*Sublime Desire*, xvii)

In its interaction with historiography, historical fiction as a complex, hybrid form has the capacity to trouble dominant narratives and produce new interpretations of the past, interpretations with significant cultural implications or resonance. De Groot emphasises that even if “much historical fiction seeks to close down difference and works conservatively to promote universalising

tendencies ... the subversive potential of the form is innate within it at all points” (4). The following chapter will consider how historical fictions produced about the Australian Great Depression have interacted with these imaginative possibilities: replacing myths; inviting interpretation of the past as moral lesson; or reaching less explicit conclusions, instead utilising storytelling as a means of interrogating the very act of myth-making. These fictional narratives, from those written during the Depression itself through to the historical fictions of the present day, offer up a similarly quarrelsome and ideologically positioned collection of accounts to those presented in the historiographies surveyed in chapter one. And while the aims of post 1970s fictions often overlap with those of the historiographies that emerged alongside them, they can also encompass the desire to forget our Depression history as much as to claim, define and interpret it.

### 3. Fictions of the Australian Great Depression

Fiction makes a complex contribution to what this thesis has termed, within certain parameters, the mythology of the Australian Great Depression; in order to unravel its complexities, it's worthwhile to define some sub-categories of fictional narrative. Three broad categories of Australian fiction set in the Depression can be identified: the first, novels and stories written during the Depression itself; the second, fictions written during or after WWII by people who experienced the Depression first-hand; and third, historical fictions, written in the later decades of the twentieth century and beyond. Fictions belonging to this third category are characterised as "historical" according to Atwood's definition: for our specific purposes here the term *historical fiction* will be used to denote any fiction set during the Depression but written by people born after 1939. The first of these began to appear in the very late 1970s, alongside the historiographies examined in chapter one.

Books travel through time; those written in the past can be read in the present; thus the body of fiction written during the Depression itself – that attempted to order, articulate and comment on something of the experience – still has the capacity to contribute to our contemporary perception of it. Ian Reid's 1979 survey, *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand*, seeks to define "Australian Depression fiction" as a genre, identify its key characteristics and explore the broader literary, historical and sociological context in which it emerged.

According to Reid, fiction written during the Depression years often carried a left-leaning political message. He writes:

In almost every Australian Depression novel there is at least one character who is a committed Communist and who is presented in sympathetic terms even if his views do not seem in every case to carry the author's full endorsement.....Australian writers convey the collective impression that Communism was gaining popular respect in their society during the 1930s. (8-9)

Reid explores in detail what he perceives as the impact of various authors' political convictions, activities, and economic circumstances on their fiction. He repeatedly demonstrates his belief that many fictions were used to soapbox authors' Communist or socialist beliefs (a remarkable proportion of authors of the era identified with the radical Left), resulting in "tedious" and clumsy novels with two-dimensional characters, which he judges polemical in tone and full of authorial intrusion (14-16). The "everyman" character proliferates, who Reid describes as "the worker-hero suffering bravely the slings and arrows of outrageous Capitalism" (15). In comparison, he asserts that authors who were not directly involved with the Party at the time of writing produced more balanced works (44).

Reid notes critics Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw's assertion that, in the "social ferment" of the 1890s, there emerged in Australia a new "class conscious literature... [p]erhaps...the first genuine proletarian literature in the world" (55). He goes on to consider the reasons for what he sees as a marked development of that consciousness among those writing during the 1930s:

[O]ne may reasonably suggest that it was at least partly a result of their being jolted by the Depression into some awareness of the actual structures of society. Most of them may still have vested their personal sympathies in the worker, but they could no longer allow this figure to exist in a nostalgic vacuum; the aim now was to place him within the context of what they understood of contemporary social dynamics. (24)

From the 1930s the working-class character, arguably the most represented in Australian literature, was made more "real" and began to appear alongside characters from a broader range of occupations and walks of life. Australian Depression fiction was notable for its engagement with the bigger political and economic picture, and sought not only to depict the "dynamic interaction" between social strata (18-20), but to "[stress] the relation of [social] phenomena to their total political and economic context" (6).

A note on the focus of this thesis is necessary here. Reid asserts that, although rural settings predominated prior to the 1930s, the majority of

Depression fictions are set in cities (28-29). He links the emergence of Australian urban fiction at this time with writers' interest in depicting the complexities and stratification of society: while the Depression was felt as severely in rural areas, the social patterns underlying it were more visible in cities, where "huge coagulations of unemployed occurred" (33). Because the novel *Dadaville* is concerned specifically with the realities and politics of urban poverty, this thesis acknowledges, but excludes from its discussion, the body of Australian Depression fictions set in the country or depicting the hardships faced by those many single men and families who took to the road to seek work. The distinction is not without significance: an examination of popular and critical responses to Ruth Park's *Harp in the South* trilogy will highlight the particular uneasiness with which we incorporate stories of urban hardship into our national mythology.

Reid also identifies the Depression years as the era in which Australians became aware of their own historicity – in Lukács' terms – and thus our first historical novels began to appear (118). He speculates that the Depression nurtured a "preoccupation with freedom and bondage" that gave rise to a number of historical fictions about Australia's convict past (126).

M. Barnard Eldershaw's novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* is a fascinating work in light of Reid's observations about what typifies Depression fictions, the rise of the Australian city novel and this new historical consciousness. Conceived of in 1937 and finished in 1942 (Reid 33), it is the final collaborative fictional work of Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw. Out of print since 1983, it is nonetheless gaining renewed appreciation as a critically significant work in the Australian literary canon. Williamson calls it "a trenchant and far-seeing attack on Australia's political and social order" (26) and "a universal exploration of individual relations to capitalist society" (27); in her preface to the 1983 edition, Anne Chisholm declares it "provocative in the extreme" (xii). Set largely in 1930s Sydney, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* is a book in which, according to Reid, big-picture politics and the urban setting as linked expressions of

Depression experience are eloquently visible and inextricable (32-33). One narrative thread follows the fortunes of Harry Munster, one-time poultry farmer, and his family as they face the Depression years in a Darlinghurst tenement. Harry fulfils the definition of Reid's ubiquitous "worker-hero", while the novel dissects with detail and clarity urban life as capitalism's ultimate expression: the city is where "man is bound on a mechanic wheel" (90) in a hopeless, blinkered cycle of competition over community.

But *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* is perhaps most remarkable for its particular mode of engagement with the idea of historicity. Its realist Depression narrative is framed by another set 400 years in the future, in which Harry Munster appears as the hero of an historical fiction written by another character, Knarf. The novel, then, seeks to articulate the present as the history of an imagined future; the authors' present becomes their own novel's fictional past. Moreover, Knarf acknowledges the past's subjectivity and unknowability: "We change, and memory changes with us. The history of memory. No one ever wrote that, did they?" (93) Reid observes that the structure allows for authorial comment on the Depression narrative in an explicit way (32), while Williamson notes that the "togglng between past and future also reminds us that the "historical" fiction remains an aesthetic artefact as much as a political jeremiad" (28).

By the time of its publication, the wartime censors had made over 400 deletions in the text, concerned that the speculative conclusion to its Depression narrative – a socialist uprising and revolution, constructed here as "history" – might sway public opinion about the war. The full, uncensored version did not appear until 1983 (Eldershaw *xiii*). This anxious reception, and Reid's observations about the particular and dynamic characteristics of fiction written during the Depression show that literature was enlisted early in the service of a collective narrative, one that might interrogate or shape ideas about the meaning of real events. The change in focus from rural to urban settings, the overt politicisation of the novel and the conceptual broadening of the society being depicted reflected a reimagining of some key Australian narratives, and their

impact was at times keenly felt and acknowledged. We will shortly consider the extent to which historical fictions of the Depression either continue or rewrite this legacy, but first we will briefly consider two examples of Australian post-war literature. Although written after the fact, these were produced by authors for whom the Depression was a personal, living memory and do not therefore classify as historical fictions according to Atwood's definition.

The first of these is not in fact a Depression fiction, but is considered here because the frequency with which it is mistaken for one reveals something about the way we choose to remember and talk about that part of our history. One of the most commonly suggested titles for readers interested in Depression novels is Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South*, first published in 1948. However, a close reading of the temporal markers in the trilogy – *Missus*, *The Harp in the South*, and *Poor Man's Orange* – reveal that the latter two books are set during the 1940s, and the first (which wasn't written until the 1980s) in the years leading up to the Depression. Although Park herself experienced the Depression, she didn't arrive in Sydney, where the trilogy is set, until 1940 (Genoni 119). In an essay about the controversial reception of the novel in its original serialised form in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1947, Paul Genoni catalogues the responses of readers, revealing a conscious concern among them about the impact of storytelling on conceptions of culture and national identity. Although opinion was divided, letters called the novel a "bad advertisement for Australia" and questioned its preoccupation with "melancholy" and "sordid" aspects of Australian life, not to mention "unadulterated filth" (123). Genoni reads this as "unease about the stories that Australians should be telling about their country at this particular point in time" and notes that while both sides of the argument conceded that Surry Hills was a slum, "the issue was whether this was something Australians should be telling the world, or indeed themselves" (122).

That we today popularly understand these novels to tell a story of Depression-era poverty is significant, belying as it does a continued denial of the existence of systemic urban poverty in our cities: if such poverty is not part

of prevailing Australian mythology, it is more convenient to attribute the conditions depicted in Park's novels to the "blip" of the Depression. Perhaps it also suggests a lack of understanding about that part of our history; if, as Williamson asserts, post-war Australia was quick to look to the future and "wanted no more reminders of the dark times" (31), then the more virulent objections to *Harp in the South* could be read as the beginning of a determined, conscious, and ultimately successful forgetting.

According to Genoni, this period of forgetting was characterised by debates about what kind of society might now emerge in Australia, "between either embracing change in a world that was irresistibly changing, or the desire to retain something (or everything) of Australia as it was when its isolation was ensured and its influences narrowly derived" (124). The second of our post-war titles, George Johnston's *My Brother Jack*, was published in 1964; not only does it tell a story about those best-forgotten "dark times", its clever, nuanced depiction of Australian masculinity and urban life speaks to that uncertain cultural moment. A semi-autobiographical novel set in Melbourne, it details the childhood, coming-of age, failed marriage and developing journalistic career of David Meredith, bookended by the two world wars and encompassing both. The titular character, David's older brother Jack, is a contrasting, almost mythical hero, an archetype of anti-intellectual Australian manhood who appears periodically throughout the book as another lens through which to view David's life and values. A sense of mediation pervades the novel due to the de-centring of the narrative through the device of Jack, and also its depiction of David's experience of suburban life as one of detachment from the real. This is a world in which the middle classes habitually ignore anything they find uncomfortable or unpleasant, a world defined by "respectability that would rather look the other way than cause a fuss ... that did not want to know because to know might somehow force them into a situation which might take the polish off the duco and blight the herbaceous borders." (258-9) His chosen profession, journalism, represents another mode of detachment even as others privilege him with access to experiences more "real" than their own, and look



to him to mediate them. At the same time, David's claim that he has "no guarantee" (248) – that he is unreliable – throws a shroud of myth around Jack. Despite Jack's recognisability, his apparent solidity as an example of what is known and accepted about "Australianness", is he any more real than David himself?

If the post-war years were a time to forget, the late 1970s and early 1980s, when both new historiographies and historical fictions about the Australian Great Depression began to appear, was clearly time to remember again. The previous chapters have discussed *why* revisionism became popular at that particular cultural moment, and looked at *how* the field of historiography tackled the tasks of remembering and rewriting. This chapter will argue that historical fictions can be read as companion pieces to that historiographic enquiry. As our examination of earlier Depression fictions shows, these later fictional representations of the Depression years did not appear in a literary vacuum; how they depart from or contrast with previous modes of storytelling about our past – *how* they go about remembering it – is equally important to their meaning. Many reflect de Groot's suggestion that the historical novel is a less individualistic novelistic form, concerned with "social movement, dissidence, complication and empathy" (2).

In the introduction to *Telling Stories*, editors Dalziell and Genoni write: "[O]ver time, a nation filters from the inexhaustible reservoir of stories those that seem to express its particular character and its place in the world. ... There may be no more certain marker of a nation than the stories it collectively chooses to tell and re-tell" (xx). The AustLit database lists hundreds of fictional works – novels, plays, short stories, verse collections – set at least in part in the 1930s and written by people born after that decade. However, while a great many of these reference the Great Depression *at some point*, a great deal fewer are set entirely during the event. It is here that I would like to propose that this distinction is significant, not just for the purposes of narrowing down the scope of this study, but because their different approaches offer important clues as to how historical fictions contribute to and interact with the broad, collective

“story” of the Australian Great Depression as we tell it to ourselves.

Within these works, the level of engagement with the Depression varies enormously. It appears in the majority as little more than temporal wallpaper, included as a passing reference to economic or political affairs largely outside of the sphere of the characters’ immediate personal concerns. An example is Roger McDonald’s 1982 novel *Slipstream*, which tells the story of celebrity aviator Roy Hilman through the interwar years, a character reminiscent of Charles Kingsford-Smith. Hilman’s obsession with flying and his personal life are the focus of this story, and are untroubled by the broader political, social and economic realities of the times. We first meet the adult Hilman in hospital recovering from a WW1 injury; over a hundred pages later, a brief mention is made of the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge; less than twenty pages later it is 1933. At no point during this period has the protagonist or his immediate circle – lovers and business associates – been significantly troubled by anything attributable to the economic forces at play during the Depression years.

Ashley Hay’s 2010 novel *Body in the Clouds* is set in Sydney across three time periods – the early colonial years, the 1930s and the present. Notable for its structural contrivance, it aims to be a rumination on history, place and Australian identity. The section set in the 1930s focuses on the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and only alludes to the Depression twice. The first occasion is in the context of competition for work on the bridge, although the protagonist is one of the lucky successful candidates, and the core narrative is therefore unaffected by it. There is also a reference to homeless men, who are portrayed in such a way that they could be generic bums of any era.

In other works the Depression exerts itself as an external influence with significance to the plot at a particular moment – a life-changing decision made under economic pressure, for example, such as loss of a job or being sent away to live with a relative – but its presence is otherwise not felt throughout the story. Hay’s novel mentions Frank Cash, the inspiration for the protagonist of Vicki Hastrich’s *The Great Arch* (2008). Another novel set in Sydney, its action spans several decades, but the focus of the book is on the period from the early

twenties through to the early thirties, when the Harbour Bridge was built. Reverend Ralph Anderson Cage is an Anglican minister obsessed with the building of the Bridge, which he can observe from his rectory. He meticulously catalogues the progress of the edifice in photographs and notes, which he collects into a self-published volume; they also find their way into his parish newsletter. The Great Depression necessarily features, in this case as slightly more than a backdrop, as there are economic necessities that drive certain plot points, such as the hiring of poverty-stricken parishioner Mrs Pessey as a housekeeper, and Ralph's inability to raise funds for his second volume; however, the Depression is not the focus of the book – as in Hay's novel, the building of the bridge is. In a sense, *The Great Arch* reflects Ralph's obliviousness: just as his obsession with something grand and beyond the everyday blinds him to the needs of his family and parishioners, the book reflects a certain blindness to the Depression, the other major historical drama of the day. Given its usage of recognisable Depression motifs to evoke the era, *The Great Arch* could be described as a text which borrows from and reinforces existing Depression narratives; its purpose is certainly not to interrogate them, or even to bring the Depression into focus as the central issue of its time.

Far fewer in number are historical fictions which treat the Depression as a lived, daily preoccupation, the very subject the purpose of the fiction itself, or integral to the story's thematic aims even if the central plot is ostensibly about something else. Helen Townsend's *Phar Lap*, a novelisation of the 1983 David Williamson screenplay, is a simple, classically-told tale of the racehorse's rise to championship fame from a cheap, unpromising colt that nobody but his trainer believed in. It explores ideas of heroism and risk and looks at Phar Lap as a national icon; and while it doesn't engage with the Depression in much detail, it explicitly contextualises Phar Lap's fame as a result of the economic crisis – the racehorse as a symbol of hope at a time of national despair:

Phar Lap dominated the racing news...the fact that he belonged to Harry Telford, a battling trainer...[made] him a national hero. And in the winter of 1930 Australians desperately needed heroes. Unemployment was rising, the national debt couldn't be paid, people were starving,

being evicted from their homes, thrown out of their jobs, and the nation was divided. Phar Lap was a symbol that things could be better, a symbol of hope and courage. (91-92)

Class stratification and values about wealth and honesty play a big part in the plot machinations around the management of Phar Lap's career by trainer Harry Telford, with the pecuniary ambitions of privileged racehorse owner Lachlan McKinnon in tension with Telford's "honest" and heroic desire to win:

The crowd in the ledger and on the flat...found it easier to identify with Harry Telford than with Lachlan McKinnon. At a time when workers were being laid off and the silvertails were keeping their jobs, it seemed right to the crowds that a battler's horse should be winning the races and taking home the prize money. (74-75)

Telford's desire for glory also comes to interact with the economic realities of the time and creates moral conundra: the pig-headedness that allows him to be straight down the line in a racing world fraught with dishonesty also lands him in economic strife.

Significantly, *Dadaville* deals with aspects of the Depression – the anti-eviction movement and shanty towns – that feature in no other adult, urban historical fiction of the Australian Great Depression. Two works, Nicholas Enright's 1982 musical play *On the Wallaby* and Nicholas Hasluck's 1987 novel *Truant State*, deal with the radical politics of the era in the context of worker strikes. Set in Adelaide, Sydney, and on the road in QLD and NSW, *On the Wallaby* follows the fortunes of the O'Brien family during the Depression through familiar tropes of Depression storytelling: the family's descent into domestic poverty; the daughter's exploitation by the labour market; an absent son who takes to the road to seek work (colloquially, "goes on the wallaby") and returns just in time to go off again to war; and a Communist character as the daughter's fiancé. A central plot thread revolves around a workers' strike at Port Adelaide, meaning that much of the script is given over to the detailed machinations of unionists. It also references the major political manoeuvres and incidents of the time, featuring Otto Niemeyer, Jack Lang, Francis de Groot and Prime Ministers Scullin and Bruce as vaudevillian bit characters, lending a

sense of farce; this is a work which depicts labour struggle and working class poverty with a distinct agenda.

Only the latter third of Hasluck's *Truant State* takes place during the Depression years. Set in Western Australia, it deals chiefly with the unsuccessful Depression-era secessionist campaign, when the state attempted to distance itself from the national debt and go it alone on the strength of its natural resources. The plot, which includes a murder mystery, centres on English migrant Jack Traverne's involvement with slippery newspaper owner Romney Guy. It's through the process of being manipulated by Guy – and seeing close-up how he manipulates the world from his powerful position within it – that Jack comes to find his own moral compass; the novel thus explores the politics of personal versus public interests, as well as making explicit comment on the project of nation-building and the consciously modern spirit of the times:

To keep the past you had to have a future... You couldn't build in a new land the same thing you had in the old. History was what you did today... History was bunk. Books and statues, and even balance sheets, were red herrings. Distractions. The only thing worth knowing in a lifetime was what you were... It was better to embark on a plan and fail than to preserve the world in aspic. Rise and fall was natural. Planning, scheming, building - it was what men did. You couldn't cling to what had gone. You should always be exploring something new; and that required shrewdness, dash, ambition. Boldness. A mind looking forward. (279)

Geoff Page's 1989 short story "Billyjim and Colonel Campbell" is a rarity in that it engages with Depression-era radical politics from the first-person perspective of a young man involved with the right-wing paramilitary organisation known as the New Guard. Billyjim is the son of a respectable pastor who was vilified for conscientious objection in WW1. He's persuaded to join the New Guard by a gung-ho workmate who spouts a lot of second-hand rhetoric and is in thrall to its charismatic leader, Eric Campbell, and the sense of purpose and outlet for youthful anger it offers. But after being sent on an assignment to rough up a grocer suspected of Communist sympathising,

Billyjim realises he might be his father's son after all. He backs out of the New Guard and in the final scene it seems his doubts have given his friend pause to reconsider too. Although the piece ultimately reveals its leftist sympathies, Page's approach proves more subtle and less morally presumptuous than many more obviously left-leaning fictions. Crucially, the story acknowledges politics as personal, something that individuals become involved with as part of a moral process.

Another work that approaches the politics of the era from an individual perspective is Jenny Pausacker's 1989 novel for children, *Can You Keep a Secret?* Thirteen year old Graham Thompson is a privileged Melbourne schoolboy whose father is involved in the League of National Security, an underground right-wing group similar to Sydney's New Guard. Graham is enlisted to disguise himself as a poor kid, infiltrate the Richmond branch of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and report back to the League on its revolutionary activities. Instead, due to his growing admiration for the local UWM leader and his first-hand experience of the realities of poverty, Graham comes to question the validity of his father's politics.

Significantly, Graham's initial enthusiasm for his assignment stems from a desire to emulate his fictional hero, WW1 comic-book hero Alan Gaunt. Historical fiction for boys in the early twentieth century continued the nineteenth century tradition of sensational adventure stories depicting key historical events and heroic figures, "interested in valour and virtue, nationalistic, and approaching the past through the lens of military history" (de Groot 89-90). As Graham's faith in his father's views is compromised, his received worldview slowly starts to unravel – including his admiration for Alan Gaunt. As an explicit critique of Britain's masculine, imperialist narratives for children, this signposts to the reader a break with tradition and the book's intention to question the ideological function of story.

Graham's transformation is gradual and without clear conclusions – the end of *Can You Keep a Secret?* sees him in a state of questioning and flux, on the cusp of a confrontation with his father. Despite the League's trigger-happy

paranoia about imminent socialist revolution, the UWM's activities have been shown to centre on street protest and eviction resistance. The book explores, therefore, the notion of "sides" and the complexities of loyalty, where individuals get ideology from and how we decide what a hero is. Above all, it's a story about finding your own moral compass, guided by experience and evidence rather than propaganda and stories.

Certain aspects of Australian Depression history, such as the anti-eviction movement and dole camps, have been treated exclusively in the category of juvenile fiction; unlike Pausacker's novel, these works tend towards much greater moral certitude. Jackie French's 1994 novel *Somewhere Around the Corner* is set for the most part in a rural dole camp; it is bookended, however, by scenes in the city. Young teenager Barbara loses consciousness during a street protest and travels back in time to the 1930s, where she is rescued by Jim, a child of "Poverty Gully", and taken there by him to live with his family in their dole camp shack. This is very much a story about the power of community and cooperation; Barbara's modern-day home life is unstable and lonely, in contrast with Jim's large and welcoming family, who are generous to a fault despite – or perhaps, in part, because of – their poverty. This same idea is reflected on a broader scale within the Poverty Gully community, whose residents mitigate the worst of the dole camp experience chiefly by cooperation and mutual charity. Poverty Gully was the name of a real Depression-era camp near French's property; on her website, she writes of her research: "While other 'susso' communities simmered with the tensions of poverty the valley people worked together, and produced poets and peach orchards and doctors and musicians. That is their legacy, though the shanties have fallen down".

In an essay about the house as a nationalist construct in Australian literature, Heather Scutter observes that "children's literature has been almost definitively concerned with notions of home and homecoming" (51). This is salient with regard to those contemporary historical fictions for children which take as their central theme the issue of shelter and homelessness. In *Somewhere Around the Corner*, the shack in Poverty Gully is represented unambiguously as

both physical and emotional home for Barbara. After she drowns in a creek, she wakes to find herself back in the present day; rather than return to her mother she seeks out the now-elderly Jim and goes to live with him in his modest suburban house, an emotionally driven decision which represents a more authentic homecoming than a return to the emotional wilderness of her former “home”. According to Scutter, “in children’s books, the homecoming designated intersects with national housekeeping, so that the child, colonised, grown-up and authenticated, is housed in a structure which contains crucial values. Outside the pale of the house and child are those values excluded from the house of the nation” (51). Barbara’s story can therefore be read as a value statement about the nature of family, belonging and human connection.

Scutter’s essay addresses one of Australia’s better-known Depression fictions for younger readers, Nadia Wheatley’s award-winning 1985 novel *The House That Was Eureka*. Another time-travel narrative linking the late twentieth century with the Depression years, Wheatley’s novel focuses on the violent crescendo of the eviction resistance movement in 1931, in which a Newtown terrace became a battleground between threatened evictees and their sympathisers, and the police sent to evict them. This actual battle haunts the two adjoining terraces depicted in the novel, forcing a political and moral crisis for the teenaged protagonists past and present. Contextualising Toni Jordan’s introduction for the 2013 Text Classics series reissue of the novel, the Wheeler Centre website asserts, in an echo of the rationale for 1980s revisionist histories such as Lowenstein’s: “[a]s we live through precarious economic times again, it’s especially timely.” Scutter sees the novel as one in which “Wheatley establishes a rewritten Australian identity in which a poor working class sets its imprint: the underdogs resist all the bulldogs in the world; and in which all cultures are included in an international community of spirit that reflects pluralism and difference” (61).

The willingness of children’s writers to tackle the grimmer aspects of Australia’s Depression history is worth dwelling upon here. While, as we have seen, there are numerous historical fictions for adults which either pass over the



Depression years or focus on more comforting icons of the era such as pioneers of aviation, or the Harbour Bridge, offering up comparatively few works with a focus on political crisis or the extremes of poverty, children's fiction does not shy away from either subject. Jordan writes, "despite writing for a young audience, Wheatley never backs away from the politics of real life. By meticulously weaving actual events and people and newspaper clippings with her imagined ones, she creates a novel that speaks for people rarely shown in fiction" (Wheatley, *The House that was Eureka*, x), while Scutter points towards the unspeakability of the "civil" war fought over workers' rights across the Eureka Stockade, the 1930s and the political protests of the 1980s (61). It is certainly the case that the personal stories of the Depression years feature many of the classic tropes of children's fiction; and perhaps that which cannot be spoken of between adults who remember, painfully, can be whispered – thrillingly – to children who have no investment in history and are full of what we might call fascination with "the horrific possibilities of the past", a fetishisation of past savagery that has long played a part in the popularity of the historical novel (de Groot 14).

That the themes offered up by such subject matter create the basis for moral tales might be part of the answer. In the tradition of children's historical fictions it is hard to extricate the idea of moral lesson from that of historical pedagogy. This view of children's historical fiction has persisted to the present day, despite postmodern feminist or counterfactual examples troubling such straightforward interpretations (de Groot 90-91). Of her motivation for writing *Somewhere Around the Corner*, French says: "Most Australian children don't know about the susso camps or why the swaggies roamed the roads. The Depression is a time that most people try to forget" (author website) suggesting that fiction might in this instance fulfil a perceived responsibility to inform younger generations about a period in our past that the history curriculum treats as taboo.

A novel which resists the urge to moralise or edify, instead utilising techniques which question the legitimacy of narrative and undermine authority,

is Ron Elliott's *Spinner* (2010), an historical novel set in the 1930s and marketed to both adults and young adult readers. *Spinner* is a superficially straightforward entertainment which imagines the beleaguered Australian Test cricket team saved by a preternaturally gifted twelve-year-old spin bowler named David Donald. Orphaned David has been raised by his grandfather on a small-town farm in Western Australia, and is whisked off by his rather suspect Uncle Michael to try out for the national team. Michael is a gambler, drinker and small-time conman, unfit for responsibility over a child. His antics get David into the team but also get the two of them into plenty of trouble.

The Depression plays a key role in this book, as does the idea of national mythmaking, which is foregrounded both in the plot and in narratorial devices. David's grandfather's farm is under financial threat, and Michael's conman activities are contextualised in the economic climate: there is his own need to make a living, but it's also implied that other people can be conned into buying his fake cricketing memorabilia because their need for stories is greater than usual in straitened times. The story of David's cricketing rise to fame is contextualised in the same way: like Phar Lap, he is the hero the nation needs, a distraction from people's troubles and a symbol of optimism. The novel's opening gambit suggests this interpretation: "It was a long time ago, between two wars, when David came along and conquered all...It was the most astonishing thing you ever saw, but all the more amazing because we needed him so much, not just his family, or his town, but the whole country" (9).

Crucially, the novel pretends to be "history" through the use of narratorial framing devices that highlight a secondary meaning for the title: a reference to the spinning of tales (which, of course, is Uncle Michael's chief skill as a conman). The novel is narrated from a third person omniscient perspective; then, in the final chapter, Michael takes over in the first person, revealing that he has been the narrator all along. The book, he claims, is his attempt to set the record straight, a form of confession, a means of redemption. An addendum follows, in which the fictional daughter of David Donald, an academic named Bronwyn Elliott (a surname she shares with the novel's

author), describes how she came into possession of the manuscript following her “Uncle Michael's death” (439).

These layers suggest some of the ways in which we legitimate accounts of the past, at the same time as emphasizing the slipperiness of such an undertaking. Michael's voice attempts to authorize the narrative as personal memory, while Bronwyn's enshrouds this further in the authority of the academy. Meanwhile, the narrative itself is not only overtly fanciful – in the climactic match of the novel, young David Donald bowls out the entire England cricket team for a collective duck – but alludes explicitly to the need to both spin tales and to believe them. This need is depicted as not only individual but necessary to the functioning of the nation. *Spinner* is an enticing national myth that invites the reader to reflect on the need for truth rather than offering up any version of it.

As we have seen, there have to date been a great variance of fictional approaches to the Australian Great Depression. Collectively, our fictional renderings of this past time represent a range of ideological statements about its meaning, and speak to the many different functions of historical fiction as a complex mode of fictional enquiry, a reflection of historiographic debates and even a means of moral and/or historical instruction. The fictions treated in this chapter demonstrate the use of the form to support political or moral positions, especially as they relate to our national “story”, and even the continued role of forgetting in shoring up reverence for aspects of our iconic past that we prefer to remember over the suffering of the Depression years.

#### 4. “Dadaville”: Dada, resistance and remaking

This thesis has already explored historical narratives of the Depression, both fictional and nonfictional, from an ideological perspective, reading each through the lens of its author’s stated or implied intention to enlist a story of the past in the service of a contemporary cultural or political agenda. In so doing, I recognise that my own attempt to write the past is inescapably subjective and ideological.

The idea that became *Dadaville* germinated in the late nineties, during several years I spent travelling in the developing world. During that time I witnessed a great deal of urban poverty, but it was living in regional towns and villages for as long as six months at a stretch that taught me the provisional nature of material comfort, and the idea for a novel began to gestate.

At that time I was part of an incongruous kind of leisured class, self-styled “travellers” keen to differentiate ourselves from the moneyed touring classes, who, we felt, put themselves in no danger of experiencing the “real” world. The inheritors of the hippie legacy of the 1960s and 70s, this sub-culture was made up of westerners who enjoyed an expansive freedom, so long as we were willing to put up with certain material deprivations. This meant living in the homes of people for whom the realities of daily life were, among other things, frequent and unpredictable power cuts; the need to collect and carry water from the village tap or well and then make it potable; and the task of disposing of increasing waste in a world where consumerism and tourism were on the rise, but there was no infrastructure such as rubbish collection or sewerage.

For an enquiry into a late-capitalist kind of cultural imperialism, this subculture would no doubt make a compelling case study, but that is not the purpose of this thesis. Suffice to say my growing shame and cynicism about it was among the reasons I eventually abandoned this mode of living and returned to Australia; it also became the basis of a politicised context for the fiction I

wanted to make, a fiction that I hoped might have the capacity to awaken the reader to some of the questions I had discovered through my experiences.

Crucially, the novel I imagined imposed developing-world deprivation onto a western setting. This would necessitate a fictionalised period of deterioration; a dystopian tale therefore emerged. Most importantly, I wanted my novel to ask the western reader to imagine themselves affected by the kind of material challenges that constitute the struggles of daily life for millions of people around the world, who are currently subject to a process of dismissive othering by those in an economic or political position to improve their living conditions. Occurring beyond our shores, reaching our awareness through images of predominantly non-white faces, from an Anglo-centric viewpoint, this kind of poverty is literally foreign (and perhaps draws on and/or contributes to imperialist definitions of foreignness, to the extent that indigenous poverty in Australia is subject to the same process of Anglo-centric othering). I wanted to challenge a certain observed sense of entitlement born of a comfortable obliviousness to what constitutes privilege in a global context, to force the imaginative leap among those who might not otherwise have cause to wonder: what if *you* had to live like that? The questions I wanted to inspire – questions which now framed my own re-entry into life in Australia – were moral in nature, concerned with the subject of how to live.

Early attempts to write the novel were unsuccessful; I was still young and developing my narrative skills, and was yet to learn the theories about the process and politics of narrativisation that would later clarify my aims and approach.

I never set out to write an historical fiction at all. I never set out to tell this story; and yet *Dadaville* appears, at its completion, as a narrative framework able to serve those preoccupations that have travelled with me, albeit informed by many intervening years of academic literary study and writing practice.

I had come to imagine the dystopian setting of my novel as a second Great Depression (at some time during this imaginative transformation, the

Global Financial Crisis took place, but my concept was of far grimmer consequences than any we have experienced in Australia as a result of that event). For ideas, I decided to raid the past, and began exploratory research into the Great Depression of the thirties. What I discovered fascinated me so much that I couldn't ignore the possibilities of a compelling historical narrative. In particular, the reality of the dole camps addressed my main thematic concern. These shanty towns were evidence that third-world urban poverty could and did happen here, in our orderly cities, less than a century ago and in an era so self-consciously "modern". Meanwhile, the remarkable drama of the related anti-eviction movement told a moving story of organised resistance, and a fascinating story of its demise (or escalation) from passive to violent.

The final, crystallising influence on the novel I was eventually to write came during a visit to the Tate Modern in London in March 2012. There, in the "Poetry and Dream" gallery of Surrealist art, I came across Max Ernst's c1924 plaster-and-cork painting "Dadaville". According to the Tate:

Ernst was a key figure in the anarchic circles of Cologne Dada before moving to Paris and the emerging Surrealist movement. This strange work dates from that moment of transition. The use of rough cork is typical of Ernst's inventive exploration of materials. By making the walls of the Dada city from this unexpected substance, he may offer a wry reflection on Dada's temporary, but resilient, nature. (Tate Galleries website)

The Tate exhibits another painting by Ernst, "The Entire City", from 1934 in which "[a] crumbling city looms oppressively below the ring-shaped moon" (Tate Galleries website). Created using the technique of grattage, which involves laying a canvas over a textured surface and then scraping paint across it – favoured by Surrealist artists for the element of chance it allowed into their work – "The Entire City" is one of a series of similar works by Ernst created during the 1920s and 30s.

I had visited the gallery in a spirit of general research into the era about which I was writing, but I found in the Ernst paintings something that resonated quite profoundly with the themes I had begun to explore. In particular,

“Dadaville” evoked the Depression shanty towns that so fascinated me. A new thematic direction emerged, my research into Australia’s nascent modern art movement of the 1930s began, and the story of *Dadaville* was born.

The 1930s was a significant decade for Surrealism, which has its roots in Dada, an art movement formed in Zurich during WW1 (Bradley 12). Fundamentally anarchic as a concept, Dada pronounced itself “against everything”, including art, the future, and Dada itself (Codrescu 2). It was at heart an exercise in irreverence, and an attempt to dismantle those prevailing social attitudes and systems, or grand narratives, which its exponents believed had led to the Great War (Elger 8-9, Richter 25).

Dada centres existed in Europe and North America, but there is no documented surrealist movement in Australia until after 1939, when the first exhibition of surrealist art was brought to our shores (Ellingsen). The novel *Dadaville* therefore imagines a small enclave of European-educated artists working in this tradition in the early 1930s. While there existed a thriving Australian modern art scene at that time, especially in Melbourne and Sydney, the art school “Maitland” which appears in the novel and the people who inhabit it are loosely inspired by the life of artist Grace Crowley, who co-ran Sydney’s short-lived Modern Art Centre in the early 1930s and afterwards the influential Crowley-Fizelle school. Crowley attributed her affinity with artist Rah Fizelle to their “mutual misery concerning ART? in Australia” (Taylor 48); *Dadaville* depicts the characters of Amelia and Laszlo as a similarly united front, despite their differing artistic sensibilities.

Dada technique looked to the found and the accidental; it sought to provoke by suggesting that anything, even a urinal, could be labelled “art” (Bradley 14). And while their aims were more influenced by psychoanalysis, the Surrealists after them continued to test the imaginative possibilities of the object:

[T]heir taste was disconcerting, to the point, they hoped, of revolution. The surrealists were drawn to things that society rejected – junk, kitsch, postcards, a souvenir from the colonies ... To find significance in society’s discards was to reveal, all the more dramatically, the subtlety

that the mind – normally numbed by habitual modes of thought – might suddenly gain when opened up to the resonance of memory and imagination. (Lloyd *xi*)

In my novel, I extend the symbolism of Ernst’s “*Dadaville*” to the shanty town, an anomaly of 1930s Australian urban life – an unexpected, accidental place made of found objects and displaced people, who nonetheless created a pastiche or collage of the world they still valued but had lost, or which had rejected them.

*Dadaville* as a novel seeks to draw on the mode of interrogation represented by these interwar art movements. Both Dada and Surrealism produced significant bodies of writing that were largely experiments in accessing the subconscious or harnessing chance to create works whose randomness raised questions about textual meaning (Ades 18, Bradley 20-21). But it is in their visual art practices that *Dadaville* finds thematic resonance, drawing an explicit parallel between these and the activities of labour-intensive scavenging, making and remaking that filled the days of so many impoverished Depression-era families. For the more politicised, the realities of this mode of survival brought capitalism into question, and as for the surrealists, the meaning and value of physical objects into a state of flux.

Aside from the symbolism of the shanty town, *Dadaville*’s intertextuality echoes this remaking of the art object: *Dadaville* contains many knowing nods to its literary forebears. Prominent Australian Depression-era writers such as Jean Devanny, Kylie Tennant and Marjorie Barnard are recognised in street and character names; Lawson Lane, where the first eviction scene takes place, is a real lane in Paddington, but the choice of it as a setting is not accidental. Barnard Eldershaw’s seminal Depression-era tome, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, is referenced in the name of the radical newsletter; the setting of the fictional Carnation Street in Darlinghurst is borrowed from that book, as are the character names Harry and Munster. Several of the objects that Maxine notices in the conservatory studio at Maitland also decorate the studio of Sam Burlington in Johnston’s *My Brother*



*Jack.*

In their minor metafictional way, these intertextual references aim to highlight the illusory nature of the enterprise of story-making, to draw attention to that borrowing and repurposing of narrative fragments, in the same mode as the historiographic plundering that is an acknowledged aspect of the historical novelist's research process and inspiration. As we have seen, an historical novel might superficially lay claim to a kind of truth, or it might seek to make no claims to truth whatsoever. It might pretend to know the past, or actively make a statement about the unknowability of the past; however, any of these interpretations rely on the reader's ability to make them. If intertextuality is a technique used to disrupt the illusion of realism, then the reader must be familiar with the references in order for this to take effect.

*Dadaville* perhaps offers more explicit opportunities for interpretation, in its telling of different stories of resistance for each of its characters.

In his book *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess*, Andrei Codrescu views Dada as a significant cultural force throughout the twentieth century and beyond, and contrasts it with another great twentieth century ideology, Russia's brand of post-revolutionary communism. This notion — the tension between the two ideologies — has influenced the conception of *Dadaville*, insofar as it contrasts the irreverence of Dada and its awareness of metanarrative with the more earnest aim of the radical left to replace one metanarrative with another.

The character of Ralph stages resistance in an obviously political way, facing down both the broader system and the violent agitators within the radical movement to which he belongs. Myra, whose imaginative survival skills were forged in the slums of Surry Hills, is more open-minded than her neighbours in her efforts to resist destitution for herself and her children. Daisy has defied her parents to take up with Amelia, and both Amelia and Laszlo seek to resist the conservatism of institutional art by striking out alone, not only to make their own, modern styles of art but to disseminate them via the school. It is the character of Jim Fraley, in his bloody-minded attachment to the very pre-war

values of masculinity, sanity and material success that make him an outcast, who struggles and fails until he is ready to accept a degree of change.

Maxine resists the life that has been proscribed to her by class and gender status and her material circumstances. She resists the values of both parents – the aspirational respectability of her dead mother, and her father’s requirement that she accept a passive role in their struggle for survival – by accepting charity, by posing nude for money at Maitland, and through her active involvement in the eviction resistance movement and her pre-marital affair with Ralph. Maxine aligns herself with people who recognise they are living through a time of change, of modernity. Excited by Ralph’s suggestion that she expand her education, she asks: “And where is the life her parents expected for her, anyway? Everywhere she looks, things are falling apart. She is doing better on her own, finding new ways to manage.”

The art world that she accesses at Maitland resists ways of seeing that have, up to that point, been considered the norm. Despite the associated risks of “rejection and poverty” for artists who embraced it, Australian modernism became a “rebellious, transforming whirlwind” writes Peter Ellingsen in an essay for *Meanjin* on the linked histories of modernism and psychoanalysis in this country (58). He argues that surrealism was part of a movement which ascribed to white Australians an “inner life” which they had hitherto ignored, and which had the power to interrogate national mythology. (Unfortunately, the potential this suggests for a Freudian enquiry into the repression of Depression narratives in Australia’s cultural memory, incorporating literary-critical ideas about the symbolic function of our geographical interiority, lies outside the scope of this thesis).

As we have seen, the significance of historical fictions about any era is their role in supporting, challenging or rewriting dominant historical narratives. In the realist mode they can present persuasive alternatives to accepted historical “truths”. At the other extreme, metafictional techniques in historical fiction stage formal resistance; these texts encourage the reader to interpret them as resisting the very act of truth-making.

*Dadaville* takes a hybrid approach. It operates as a realist, linear fiction, but its narrative arc is conceived to offer little traditional comfort to the reader. Significantly, Maxine's journey takes her from a place of uncertainty and potential to another of equal uncertainty and potential, rather than offering her resolution and closure.

The role of heroic agency in narrativised history has been debated since the interwar years by prominent critics such as Lukács, Barthes and White. For Lukács, the "poetic awakening" of the people who lived in the past was of far greater importance in the historical novel than depiction of the events through which they lived (Lukács 42), because it highlighted the historical agency of the individual in a life that encompassed a sense of journeying or progress. In this way, historical fiction could communicate to readers something of their own historicity, an idea de Groot recognises as inherently political (27).

In one sense the narrative arc of Maxine's story could be seen to highlight processes of internal transformation: the awakening of her agency. By the end of *Dadaville* her circumstances are no less materially precarious and no less tenuous in terms of her social connectedness than they were in the opening chapter of the novel. Yet many things have passed: she has changed, she has grown, and she has learned resources. These resources and knowledge, in fact, are the only things she has gained.

But does she feel she knows the world any better? Throughout *Dadaville*, a sense of belonging is denied to Maxine. This thesis has assumed familiarity with the key ideas of post-colonial fiction as a well-worn mode of literary resistance to the narratives of empire. Maxine and Jim Fraley are British migrants, come to this far flung outpost of their known world, a place that is nothing more than an idea, where they have almost no connections and nothing for them is certain. *Dadaville*'s Anglo-centricity acknowledges Maxine's own experience of the world up until the point we encounter her. She comes from a cloistered and land-locked world without "sailors from foreign ports", and we witness her first, tentative encounters with people from other cultures as she ventures out into the unknown avenues of the world. Her lack of expressed

judgement about these encounters contributes to a lack of definitional finality offered by *Dadaville* on the subject of Australian life.

We might also ask: does Maxine know herself any better? In striking out on her own, both towards financial independence at the start of the book and finally away from Ralph, and especially in the resolution of her sense of ongoing responsibility for Jim, she becomes someone with an idea of herself which is, for the first time, not relative to others.

But just as she becomes the sum of her experiences, she also experiences a stripping away of identity, a process symbolised by the suitcase which accompanies her from England, through three evictions and finally on her journey away from the dole camp. In the interim it's also how Maxine transports her *susso* provisions – a symbolic vessel of rebellion and shame. It first appears with her father, on the occasion of their first eviction:

In his left hand was one of their two suitcases, still bearing the luggage tag from the steamer and their old Midlands address, as though, despite the intervening three years and the picket fence, their emigration remained provisional.

But by the final chapter, it “has long been stripped of the tags that showed where it has been and to whom it belongs.” Lastly, it is further reduced to an insubstantiality: “The suitcase, almost empty, has little weight of its own. It is only made of cardboard, after all.”

This shedding of literal and symbolic baggage speaks to the idea that our history is something we might choose either to hold onto or to shake off. Significantly, Maxine has not chosen a new identity to replace the one she has lost, suggesting that identity, whether personal or national, is something constructed or performed via legitimating narratives.

The ethos of Dada, too, has its roots in performance, through which it sought in a variety of forums to discourage the moral and intellectual passivity of its audience (Elger 7). And historical storytelling, according to Barthes, encourages passivity in its audience by transforming the events of history into theatre or “spectacle” (White 276). To narrativise history is to ascribe to real

events the form of myth and fiction, an act which is ideological precisely because it inculcates a sense, among other things, of the “sovereign subject (whether an individual or a collectivity) as the principal agent of historical events” and of history itself as episodic events linked by cause and effect. The very features that, for Lukács, gave historical fiction its political importance were, to Barthes, suspect and undermining.

White questions, however, as does Slotkin, whether we can be sure that the coherence of narrative is *never* representative of historical or lived processes. White suggests that rather than trying to answer this question, we can more profitably analyse the ideology of which generic *type* of narrative is used in an historical account (283). This, he argues, “permit[s] us to locate the question of the ideological content of historical storytelling at the level of the figurative meaning of the discourse, rather than at the level of its literal factuality” (284).

White is addressing this issue as central to historiography rather than fiction, emphasising that the need to be faithful to the historical record makes storytelling highly complex for historians, who can nonetheless tell many different stories about the same set of events without straying from the “facts” (288-9), as this thesis has shown.

If, however, we apply the same idea to historical fiction we can make an interpretation of *Dadaville*’s eschewal of the traditional arc of the heroic narrative. While Maxine engages at times in the novel in what might be considered “heroic” acts – for example, taking significant personal risks to resist eviction, save Ralph, and protect her father – she does not “arrive” anywhere, either literally or metaphorically, as a result of these actions. Novels that deal with the same aspects of Australian Depression history, like Wheatley’s and French’s, suggest through the device of the time-travel narrative that our Depression history is not done, but full of unresolved stories that make themselves felt in the present. They ultimately suggest that there are lessons to be learned from history, and that continued failure to learn will result in history repeating itself.

*Dadaville*'s lack of resolution hopes to suggest something different, however: while Maxine's story is not "done", the novel offers no clear direction, no pointers for evaluation. Maxine moves on from the past, but is "not afraid of where she's been"; seated on the tram, she is even content to look upon it as the tram moves away from the dole camp and into an uncertain future. The dole camp she has rejected, as "Dadaville", is shown to be a provisional place of shelter which only mimics, grotesquely, the cultural meanings of the world it seeks to replace. The novel's open ending highlights her potentiality, then, rather than ascribing a closed meaning about her experiences, reflecting perhaps a potentiality in all historical accounts.

## Conclusion

The Great Depression was a contemporary reality in Australia when we began to tell stories about it. The fictions of that era survive to tell us something of how we then understood the social, political and economic forces at work and the lessons we thought we should learn. They also tell us something of how we viewed ourselves as a culture and a nation. They speak of an emerging consciousness of both our own historicity and the fully-fledged complexities of our urban communities.

It's been argued that the Depression engendered such suffering that for a period following the events we almost stopped telling stories about it altogether. But over the last few decades, historians and novelists have questioned the wisdom or stoicism of this deliberate forgetting. Informed by a new conception of History as ideological and constructed, historians have begun to *re-tell* the story of the Depression years in dissonant and controversial ways. In these re-tellings, the actual events of the Depression are less contested than the meanings ascribed to them. The question of how our past impacts upon our identity as a nation causes particular anxiety, as historians interpret the political and social turmoil of the 1930s in various ways, each according to his or her own explicit or subconscious bias or aims. In this sense the story of our Depression narratives is the continuing story of the political power of story itself.

As history, the Great Depression in Australia elicits markedly emotional responses. Among these is compassion for past hardships, but there is also outrage borne of a recognition that history itself, as a subjective account, can be a kind of injustice. Ironically, the more frequently history is re-told in an attempt to include whatever aspects of the past have been lost, overlooked or silenced, the more elusive the past itself becomes.

As this thesis has shown, the ongoing devolution of History into multiple and contradictory accounts of the past does not take place solely in

historiography. Historical fiction, as a worthwhile adjunct to traditional historiographic enquiry, further dilutes and complicates official or accepted versions of past events. It cannot perform quite the same function as historiography; rather, it has a complementary value if one is prepared to question the truth claims of narrativised History as a mediated and subjective discourse. Historiography has sought to divest itself of association with imaginative storytelling, and its dependence on literary technique is therefore problematic. The historical novel is uniquely placed to highlight that problem and challenge the legitimacy historiography seeks to draw from its status as nonfiction. Even so, novels do not always highlight or even recognise their own subjectivity, reflecting instead their authors' preoccupation with the moral lessons of the past. Nor do novels always contest accepted narratives of the past: as we have seen, many historical fictions set in the 1930s Australia have failed to engage with the Depression beyond familiar tropes.

In writing *Dadaville*, I've tried to resist the urge to create a new mythology, a moral lesson, a closed story. If historical fiction is a form of narrativisation woven of and around other narratives – historiography, memory – that might themselves be seen as fictional forms, then the novel *Dadaville* is nothing more than a story made out of other stories. Like the shacks in a Depression-era dole camp, like the makeshift furniture made out of crates and tins, and the wagga blankets sewn from squares of salvaged cloth and stuffed with newspapers for warmth, like a Dada collage, the novel itself is made out of scavenged, repurposed fragments. As fiction it makes no claims to truth, but is rather an attempt to acknowledge the Depression as part of our national story without fearing that it might compromise or diminish us; an invitation to consider the possibilities and implications of rewriting history.



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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I'm grateful to my supervisor Dr Phillip Edmonds, for his knowledge, commitment and belief in this project. Many thanks also to co-supervisors Professor Brian Castro and Dr Susan Hosking, and to the clever and supportive staff and postgrads of the Adelaide Uni English Department. It's been a privilege to work with you all.

For reading, re-reading and proof-reading, and all the thinking and talking that goes on in between: thanks to David Sornig, Lynne Cooper and Fiona Inglis.

Thank you to everyone in my family. You have all helped in so many ways over the last few years. And especially – for many years of love, faith and general putting-up-with – thanks to Simon, Cormac and Anton Lee.