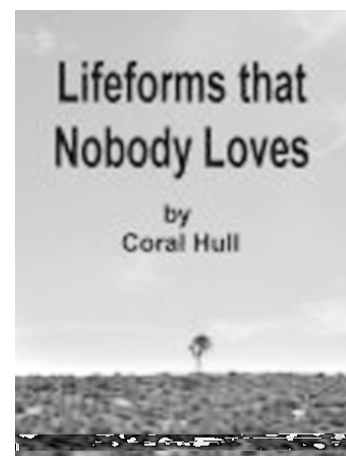
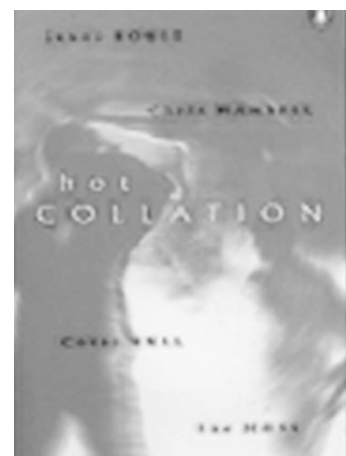
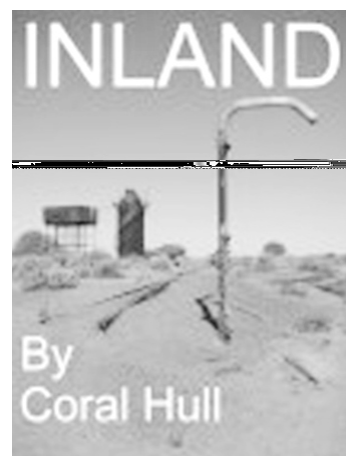


INTERVIEW

Coral Hull: An Encounter

A sensitive voice in contemporary Australian poetry and an animal right activist, Coral Hull is the author of thirty-five books of poetry, prose fiction and digital photography. Her work has been published in literary magazines in the USA, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. She is also the Editor of The Book of Modern Australian Animal Poems, an anthology of Australian poets writing about animals from 1900-1999. She has lectured and read poetry at various festivals and conferences both in Australia and internationally. She was awarded the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 1998 for her poetry book *Broken Land*. Her major books include *In The Dog Box Of Summer in Hot Collation*, (poetry), Penguin Books Australia, 1995, *William's Mongrels in The Wild Life*, (poetry), Penguin Books Australia, 1996, *Broken Land*, (poetry), Five Islands Press, 1997, *How Do Detectives Make Love?*, (poetry), Penguin Books Australia, 1998, *Remote*, (photography), Thylazine Publishing Australia, 2000, *Zoo* (John Kinsella/poetry), Paperbark Press, 2000, *Inland*, (photography), Zeus Publications, 2001, and *Landscape Photography With Dogs*, (chapbook). Coral edits the *Thylazine*, an electronic literary journal featuring articles, interviews, photographs and the recent work of Australian writers and artists. She is also Contributing Editor to *The Drunken Boat* (USA). Coral completed a Bachelor of Creative Arts Degree (Creative Writing Major) at the University of Wollongong in 1987, 1st Year of a Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree (Conceptual Art) at the South Australian College of Advanced Education in 1990, a Master of Arts Degree at Deakin University in 1994, and a Doctor of Creative Arts Degree (Creative Writing Major) at the University of Wollongong in 1998. Coral Hull was at the XI International Poetry Festival in Medellin, Colombia in June, 2001 where she met Ziaul Karim. A distinctive voice in contemporary world poetry, Coral Hull has been the cynosure of the poetry festival. She gave this interview to Ziaul Karim later through e-mail.



Ziaul Karim: Australia has never been part of the English literary mainstream. People outside Australia know very little about contemporary Australian literature. Would you please tell us about the present landscape of Australian literature?

Coral Hull: Whilst I understand that it is often expected that creative artists are literary theorists, reviewers and critics as well, I see the two as entirely different occupations involving different ways of thinking, that I am not sure are entirely compatible. I am a full time writer and photographer and will leave the theory to the theorists for now. It is a shame that the 'literary mainstream' of the world has missed out on Australian literature. My question is, who else has it missed out on?

ZK: What are the contemporary trends in Australian poetry?

CH: As editor and publisher of *Thylazine* (Australia) and a contributing editor to *The Drunken Boat* (USA), I enjoy promoting the work of other Australian poets. However from where I stand, the subject matter of most 'acceptable' Australian poetry often comes from middle-class, middle-aged Anglo Saxons or educated inner city bohemians from wealthy backgrounds. It's still largely male dominated and conservative. Most poetry plays it safe and the reward for this mediocrity is generous government funding from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. Let's put it this way, no Australian poet that I know is going to be arrested for being a threat to the government. Poetry about alcoholic beverages

pass, as does romantic ego-centric poetry, either about a mid life crisis or what poets see on the news. Poets don't get put under house arrest in Australia, they get ignored. Sadly, poets in Australia are never allowed to emerge as culturally significant in the first place. I would like to see Australian poetry become less pretentious and lightweight in its subject matter, with more working class, female and indigenous Australian poets being represented. I would like to see government funding in Australia based on literary merit rather than who you know. Lastly, I would like to see a small and sometimes unnecessarily snobbish Australian poetry scene, learn to appreciate and support each other's work.

ZK: English literature is being enriched by what is called post-colonial writings. Writers from England's past colonies in the words of Salman Rushdie are 'writing back to the Empire'. How do you look at this trend?

CH: This is not my area of expertise. **ZK:** One is impressed with the skill with which you have narrated your five-day sojourn of Brewarrina, a country town in Australia in your book of poems *Broken Land*. You have given your undivided attention to the details of your journey- mental and physical. What is the chemistry of your writing and does it vary according to the themes of your poems?

CH: I believe that the initial creative process must occur, at least to a large degree, without analysis or self-consciousness. My intention is

to create art, not dismantle it. I once talked about why I used slashes in a conversation with Australian poet Emma Lew (Thylazine No.1), basically because I got asked so much. If as many people asked me why it would be a good idea to become vegan and to stop hurting other sentient life on earth unnecessarily, then we'd have a great revolution!

ZK: You appear to have employed different narrative schemes for describing different mental and physical scenarios in this book. For example in describing the topography of the place, it seems you have employed fast and racy stanzas while in giving a picture of your 'Dad's House' you have captured the whole picture in one long stanza running over two pages. Would you elaborate on this?

CH: I was in a small aeroplane and had to write quickly as the landscape whizzed by. When I got to my father's house we were smoking heaps of dope, so that slowed the pace down. I'm just joking. I really don't know why I speed up and slow down. Maybe it would help to know. I don't know.

ZK: Suppose I say that the voice in the poems seems to be that of a stranger who is making judgements like a traveler and there is no serious attempt to understand the people and culture of the place, how would you respond?

CH: There are many details in this work that would not have been picked up by a traveler. After five days I haven't even found the local pub! I am not the expert of this town,

hence I wanted people to speak for themselves. It was basic documentation. When Justine Lees (sound technician), Amanda Shillabeer (actor) and myself went back out to Brewarrina to do some recording for an hour special on Radio National during 1999, they said it was as if they had stepped into the book as well as into the town. People were literally saying and doing things parallel to the original text. It even startled me! I was still wondering if the book had happened on this level. My father and his side of the family come from the Brewarrina, Bourke and Cobar area. My great great grandfather named Cobar (Kubba, meaning native waterhole) with an Irishman, an Englishman and two indigenous Australians. I have lived out that way at certain times in my life over a number of years. I also went there on school holidays as a child. Yet sometimes it might take one intense experience in order to gain knowledge of place. At other times one might live there for a decade and know nothing. People cannot claim to know land simply because they have placed a foot upon that land. No one can claim to know land simply through living there or their ancestry. They must firstly let the land speak to them and this has to do with the heart, not the resident. It has to be received in some way, passed down or allowed in to affect the soul. I believe that anyone who is open to that presence of place can begin to understand it. Personally, I feel at home wherever I am in Australia. I love this place and respect the indigenous people who first named it.

ZK: Your description of the place you are visiting suggests your interest in photography as each of the poems are treated from a photographic point of view, if I may use the term cinematic to a greater extent. Is that a useful literary device?

CH: My first creative influence was film and television. My mother recently told me that she used to prop me up in my pram in the aisles at the cinema. I have always been interested in short film in the areas of cinema photography and script writing, but as an art form it's far too expensive to warrant my involvement at this time. I recently found out that a small Australian film crew who were making a nature documentary in Kakadu National Park, where I have been photographing landscape and wildlife for the past few days, accidentally knocked a \$120,000.00 camera from an aluminium dingy into the water. It can only benefit writers to mix with visual artists who seem to notice amazing things in the most unlikely places. Even before response and interpretation it's all about 'seeing' the external environment, which is something visual artists are very good at doing.

ZK: Do you take notes of your inspiration and later build on it or does it grow as a poem when you write along? Is writing poetry an emotional or an intellectual act for you or both?

CH: I have completed thirty-five books of poetry, prose fiction and digital photography. I work on up to twenty projects simultaneously and often in partnership with other people. There are hundreds of photographs and pages of both typed and hand written notes involved in this process which means a lot of time cataloging and marketing work around the world. My poetry usually undergoes about 14 drafts taken from rough notes. As for my photography, even whilst working in a digital medium, I still have a large proportion of photographs that turn out during a shoot. The reason for this is because over the years I was unable to afford film and development costs. I had to make every shot count. The con-

centration needed in order to make this work is intense. When I stop photographing, it's as if suddenly I wake up out of a world. In the past I relied on second hand and often faulty cameras, but it was the action of creation that was important, rather than the ability to afford creation. I think that creating art is firstly an emotional response that lacks analysis and self-consciousness to some degree. Sometimes we just have to let art happen. As the editing process begins I anticipate an audience and it becomes more of an intellectual process. In order to be true to myself, I must firstly write for myself, whatever the consequences. My work must not fall victim to inner censorship. At the same time I must also be ultimately responsible to an audience which I see as part of my contribution to the greater society. Whilst I am not concerned with commercial product, there must be this sense of communication with others, and whether that comes from meaning, beauty or simply the form itself, it doesn't matter.

ZK: You were recently at the XI International Poetry Festival in Medellin, Colombia among other 120 poets from 75 countries from around the world. Have you noticed any change in post-cold war poetry?

CH: For the past week my primary concern has been completing a photographic project documenting kangaroo roadkill along the entire length of the Stuart Highway which runs from the north to the south of Australia for a distance of approx. 3,000kms. I decided to work on this highway for as long as it took, in order to photograph every one of the dead kangaroos who still had a face. I am able to tell you where the most lives have been lost from one end of Australia to the other. I am able to talk about outback highway travel and how to avoid hitting a kangaroo whilst driving on Australian roads. I am more interested in talking about these things than trends in Australian poetry, post colonialism or post-cold war poetry. You can't get further away from the literary world than what I am doing out here. At one point a road train (53 metre long truck) passed within a few feet of where I was working and ended up blowing flies, corpse gas and maggots onto me. I was in the midst of a good shot and didn't move back from the highway fast enough. Yet I find it more rewarding to be outback amongst the dead than at a literary function. I want to find what's left out here and for people to understand why this has happened. I want the agony experienced by these kangaroos to have meant something, for I love each one of them as much as I love myself. As I photographed yesterday time slipped away and everything but the task at hand became irrelevant. There is a point where it all becomes irrelevant and I believe that occurs when we are confronted by the suffering of an individual. This interview, literary theory and even art becomes irrelevant, so long as anything truly suffers in the world. Whilst we don't have to beat ourselves up about our own powerlessness, we also don't have to add to this situation by causing more unnecessary suffering. I don't know how to say it any other way, but I believe we can create heaven on earth, once we turn our life over to the greater good and act on its behalf. That's what the art of living is all about. Thank you for your time and interest in my work.

ZK: Thank you very much indeed.

Ziaul Karim edits literary and cultural pages of The Daily Star

FROM *BROKEN LAND*

Day One

1. ARRIVING IN BREWARRINA

1. Topography

From up here the land is charted, colour coded, topographic & mapped out
We keep our distance from it, humming in space.
It gets drier & flatter as the wide haze lifts.
Sunlight hits the white plane wing like a wedge.
Grey, orange & olive dust hanging in the air,
out over the Macquarie Marshes Wetlands.
It goes out & flat & west & west.
Absolutely flat, except for Mount Oxley in the haze.
I'm 8000 ft above sea level-flying Airlinik.
My briefcase out in the wing.
Looking down, as the land becomes flatter, more in need of rain.
There is light soil beneath the trees, worn in around the bases,
from where cattle have turned into buttery fat
& have shared some shade.
The foggy glare up from the ground
is burning into the backs of my eyes.
The Warrumbungles to one side, glare & mist.
The young pilot looks at maps. Coolabah 30 kms to the left
& rivers like ribbons lying flat,
then turning on their sides, to stretch & dry up.
Drier & less controlled the further out.
Below the haze of the clear day,
the two silver watertanks in the distance,
the dot of Brewarrina.
We are coming in to land.
The tilt of the wide wing turning on its side.
The plane touches down in the red sand.
The roly poly bushes roll in.
A few white flags stand still.
I haven't seen dad in three years,
but it's just as usual.
He's standing there with a lit smoke.
A few more fingernails just bitter off.
He tries to conceal a smile.
Patch barking from the ute.
He grabs my bag & runs away so I can't kiss him.
So I let him go.
I'm anxious & have a slight headache.
It's all the dust particles that were suspended in the air,
light reflecting off them.



Coral Hull: A fecund poet

BOOK REVIEW

Unrevised [re]visions, odd omissions & sly surprises

Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* is not really a "revised edition", but a new reprint slapped on at the end with what he calls "a small new book, a Part II, surveying the past decade", says Sudeep Sen

WHEN Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English* first appeared in 1987, it was the first comprehensive book to be published at the time that mapped this particular territory with detailed interest and success. It almost became like a Bible on the subject, the only worthwhile reference tool that I would dip into when I needed some information or trivia surrounding the area of poetry written in English by Indians.

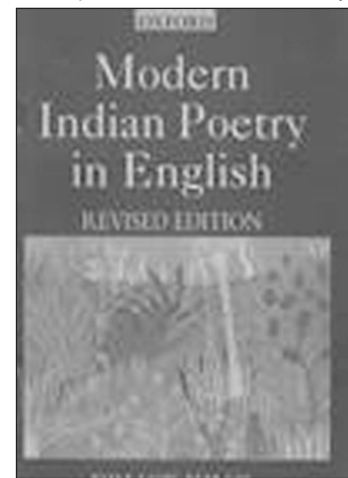
As I finished re-reading its "revised edition" *avatar* published with an additional 120 or so pages some fourteen years later, I feel disappointed at a wonderful opportunity that has not been fully utilised and wasted. Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* is not really a "revised edition", but a new reprint slapped on at the end with what he calls "a small new book, a Part II, surveying the past decade". King has decided against alterations to the original version as it "would require revising the text ... and rewriting for the sake of consistency, the entire book". Now would not a "revised edition" require exactly the basics of such revision, addition, omission, and even rewriting if required? The lack of all these comes as both a surprise and disappointment from someone whose critical writings on Commonwealth fiction, drama, and poetry, I have come to admire over the years.

Except for the 'Chronology of Significant Publications, Journal, and Events' that appears in the appendix, the interesting and informative tables and charts that appeared in the original edition remain unchanged and un-updated here, leading to a misleading impression of the current poetry scene.

This edition is clearly put together hastily or without any deep driving interest—clearly the writer's soul is missing, or indeed the want or desire for new discoveries and sharp critical discussion is absent. This "revised edition" is riddled with innumerable spelling errors, names that have yawning misspellings (just to cite three examples—Daniel Wiessbort is spelled "Weisbrot",

Desmond Kharmawphlang's name ends with the letter "d", and Peepal Tree Books is spelt "Peepul"). Further, many significant facts have been left out, and insignificant or irrelevant ones irritatingly included (such as M Sambrani and J Thayil's move to the US, as if they were earth-shatteringly relevant poetry events).

And most importantly, the book seems to steer clear of discussing in detail, the more cerebrally challenging poets who are writing in the contemporary scene (Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Vijay Seshadri, just to merely name two examples). To add to that, several mediocre and banal poets have made their way



Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition
By Bruce King, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, 416 pp., Rs 595 (hb), ISBN 019-565616-4

into this volume, their names (or their work) are best left undiscussed here for the sake of civility.

Only the chapter on Agha Shahid Ali is comprehensive and worth its entire text-space, and the one on 'Publishing 1987-1999' is somewhat useful. The rest of the new ones in 'Part II' are fairly superficially myopic thumb-sketch surveys, with some astonishingly curious chapters titles like 'New Women Poets'. It is surprising and disturbing that even in the 21st century, women poets are being categorised separately from the male poets. Why is the chapter

on the newer male poets universally titled as just 'New Poets' and not 'New Male Poets'? No visible rationale or consistency here! Why can't a poet be judged just as a good poet on the basis of their writing irrespective of their gender, or even personal sexual bias?

Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* is not at all worth its steep Rs. 595 price tag, in spite of the respectable OUP imprint on its spine. The commissioning editor, the editors overseeing this title, and the author are responsible for a highly forgettable piece of work—something that could have been fantastic, but instead presents itself within a misleadingly attractive matt-laminated hardcover. Even the self-proclamation of King that this "present double-decker seemed the more elegant solution" is very far from the stated poise or the desired elegance, not to mention its deep inadequacies. A wonderful opportunity to remap the English-language Indian poetry terrain and to rearrange the essential blocks in the growing canon has been lost and laid waste.

I hope an untainted, bright, and free-thinking poet/scholar is able to take up this challenge to come up with a comprehensive, critically astute, intelligent book on this subject, sooner rather than later. There are a lot of fine poets in India and in the Indian diaspora—in fact Indian poetry in English has now reached a core critical mass. One just needs to be broad-mindedly selective and sensitive to come up with a book that is engaging, erudite, and one that pushes the boundaries of hackneyed old-fashioned criticism.

But as the current Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: Revised Edition* stands, one would not waste either money or shelf-space by bothering to buy this so-called "revised edition" if you already possess the earlier 1987 edition—and that is an enormously stupendous shame. Indeed, a real pity.

Sudeep Sen's *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins) was awarded the Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and nominated for a Pushcart Prize (USA).

ESSAY

A Tribute to the Other Parent: The Mother in V. S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas*

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK
REBECCA HAQUE

AS we soon find out in the next chapter ("The Chase"), what Mr. Biswas gets is a taste of independence in the form of the proprietorship of the tiny, abandoned Tulsis general store situated in The Chasethe "long straggling settlement of mud huts in the heart of the sugarcane area" (141). Though Mohun is despondent at the dilapidated condition of the shop and their living quarters, Shama is transformed into an efficient, confident person. Mohun is "astonished at the change in Shama" (146), but in fact this change is not all that surprising or sudden. At Hanuman House, Shama had never been looked upon as a mature, responsible adult, and no one had ever given a thought to her wishes. She was used to obeying unquestioningly the unwritten laws of the family organization, and had learnt to subsume individual ambition to the general welfare of the household and continuity of tradition. Even after her marriage neither her position nor her power relationship within the organization had altered. At The Chase, however, for the first time in her life Shama is in control of her own life and the situation. Freed from the first time from total economic dependence on her own immediate family, Shama projects a newly discovered awareness of her own worth as an individual. She eagerly anticipates a future which will grant her a degree of autonomy, without compromising or sacrificing traditional sexual and maternal roles. Naipaul has given us every reason to believe that Shama possessed intelligence as well as a pretty face, and, in her many verbal confrontations with Mr. Biswas, she had displayed a ready wit and a healthy sense of humour. Now, these qualities as well as other untried and latent gifts surface to make her a good, capable, and loving wife.

The repetitive cadence of the words "it was Shama" does not merely register Mr. Biswas's amazement at the emerging competence and resourcefulness of his wife, it also recognizes both his growing admiration for her and his dependence on her. Shama's initial reluctance at leaving Hanuman House had been due to an understandable fear of the unknown, a fear compounded by the fact that she was pregnant. But after the first child is born, Mr. Biswas notices Shama blossom into a radiant, self-reliant woman.

Shama's first child is a girl, Savi.

In the six years that Mr. Biswas struggles to make a success of the grimy store at the Chase, two more children are born: the son, Anand, and the second daughter, Myra. For each birth and confinement, Shama goes back to Hanuman House. Traditionally, and as a general rule, Indian women have had their first child in their parental home, and, if the parents are prosperous and willing and within reach, the daughter returns for subsequent births. In Shama's case, the shuttling back and forth between The Chase and the town of Arwacas/Hanuman House is located on Arwacas's High Streets as much for financial reasons as for accommodation. Mohun's failure as a shopkeeper is painfully apparent to Shama who, after years of working in the Tulsis store at Arwacas, had a more developed commercial sense than her husband. In these circumstances, Hanuman House once again becomes a haven offering refuge and security. Shama, older, wiser, and with the welfare of her own three children to consider, tactfully merges into the organization of the household where she herself had no recognized individual talent. However, despite the frequent quarrels with her husband, Shama does not altogether take up the old antagonistic attitude in public. There is an unspoken bond and an unconscious loyalty towards the husband, arising as much out of a sense of obligation to the sacred marriage vows as out of affection for the poor man driven and tormented by his lonely dreams for the future. At this stage in her life, before Mr. Biswas has attained any recognizable success either in her eyes or in the eyes of the world, Shama can do no more than watch and wait for better days to come.

Not surprisingly, one fundamental reason for the subtle change in Shama's attitude towards Mr. Biswas and the basis now of greater solidarity with him than with her sisters is the mutual concern both feel for their growing children. As Mr. Biswas gradually moves upward in the social scale the debacle with the shop at The Chase is followed by an equally disastrous period as a driver, or sub-overseer, on the Tulsis land at Green Vale, and then finally by the fortuitous employment as a regular reporter of the daily newspaper *The Trinidad Sentinel* he begins to bring home a meagre yet steady income. With his niche in society carefully carved and as carefully protected until his death, Mohun Biswas ceases to be the peripatetic parent, and henceforth the six members of the Biswas family—the fourth child, the daughter Kamla,

having been born in the meantime begin to live in two cramped rooms of the Tulsis house in the capital city of Port of Spain. And except for the brief "Shorthills adventure" (Part 2, Chapter 3), the result of Mrs. Tulsis's whimsy, Port of Spain is where the family stays.

As the narrative of *A House for Mr. Biswas* moves full circle to the moment when we see Shama proudly secure in her own house at Sikkim Street, we begin to understand that there are unplumbed depths in this woman. Her presence is a comfort to her husband and her children: she is always there to give them love, solace, or advice, and, as Anand notes, "she always managed" (466) to scrape out a few coppers out of the housekeeping money to pay for some little treat or other for the children. As a wife and as a mother, Shama has undoubtedly fulfilled not transcended her family's expectations. And even outside the family's sphere, in new or unfamiliar situations, Shama is a wonder. Naipaul forces us to acknowledge Shama's social success in the brilliant cameo performance with Miss Logie, Mr. Biswas's friend and newly arrived head of the Community Welfare Department in Trinidad.

Sitting plumply next to Miss Logie on the front seat, her elaborate georgette veil over her hair, Shama was showing herself self-possessed and even garrulous. She was throwing off opinions about the new constitution, federation, immigration, India, the future of Hinduism, the education of women. Mr. Biswas listened to the flow with surprise and acute anxiety. He had never imagined that Shama was so well-informed and had such violent prejudices ... (504)

The key word in the above passage is, of course, "self-possessed." Shama's life may not have been an easy one, but she has survived the worst of times, and, in the end, Mr. Biswas had proved to be a better mate than she had imagined him to be. The years with him have not been altogether without happiness and laughter, and the journey from Hanuman House to her own house at Sikkim Street has been a long and eventful one. At the end of the novel, as she returns to the house after the cremation of her husband, we realise that Shama Biswas is strong and resolute enough to keep going alone and not falter in her future role as the single parent of four marvellous children.

Rebecca Haque is Associate Professor of English at Dhaka University