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Moya Costello
Southern Cross University

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TEXT review

Murray Bail, *The Pages*; Helen Garner, *The Spare Room*

review by Moya Costello

Murray Bail
The Pages
Text, Melbourne, 2008
ISBN 9781921351464
Hb, 199 pp, \$34.95

Helen Garner
The Spare Room
Text, Melbourne, 2008
ISBN 9781921351396
Hb, 195 pp, \$29.95

Murray Bail and Helen Garner are two of Australia's great stylists.

Bail is the more inaccessible of the two: idiosyncratic, an acquired taste. A clue to his tone might be his citing of Torgny Lindgren as a writer he favours. You could try Lindgren's *Sweetness*. In a review of *The Pages* in *The Australian Literary Review*, Delia Falconer described Bail's writing as characterised by 'pebbly precision and surprising syntax'; in his essay 'Photography, Finitude, Fatigue, Fatality: The Unimportance of Being Murray Bail', Andrew Johns/John Attridge describes it as 'jerky, photographic writing' and 'effete theorising'.

Effete would not be a word you'd use for Garner. In *The Spare Room*, for example, one of the most visceral episodes is Helen's pragmatic fight alongside government departments against the charlatanism of The Theodore Institute as a shonky form of alternative medicine.

These two new novels from Bail and Garner are short, a consistent Garner form, and are part of a gathering of Australian authors of the short novel that includes Gerald Murnane and Kate Jennings, and now Amanda Lohrey.

Bail's novels are always about representation and art and the fictiveness of fiction. His writing demonstrates tone, Garner's perhaps mood. In relation to the pedagogy of style in creative writing, Bail can be used to demonstrate hyperrealism and foregrounding narrative process, and Garner sustained metaphor.

Moments of hyperrealism in *The Pages* include the obstacles for two women driving along Parramatta Road: 'nouns, adjectives and flags'; and the edge of a sandstone window in a university philosophy department that is 'weathered and worn smooth by the never-ending revision of ideas'.

Bail opens *The Pages* with 'At dawn - what a word: the beginning of the world all over again ...', in much the same way he wrote 'Once upon a time there was a man - what's wrong with that? Not the most original way to begin ...' in *Eucalyptus*. Singularity and originality are hedged about by iteration and finitude.

Anger, regret, sorrow, sadness and incomprehension stalk the pages of *The Spare Room*. Death is not new to Garner as subject matter. I have kept re-reading 'The Recording Angel' (*Cosmo Cosmolino*), partly in simple fascination with its awful truth; and this particular moment from *Cosmo Cosmolino* stays with me:

We had not learnt the words with which to speak of death. "Poor Chips," whispered the last of the household children ... "he died of *loneliness*." They sat in a pew ... listening to the ramblings of a ... contemporary ... who knew of no comfort to offer ...

The Spare Room sustains a metaphor of death, whether it be a shattering wall mirror, dark gardens and drooping roses, the looming presence of a deadline (the requirement 'to find something new' and, presumably, fill a blank page), a dried-out pumpkin, something small crackling mulch while grooming itself, or a whole young family down with colds.

The Spare Room is also an exercise in the hybrid. As with WG Sebald, one's unspoken question while silently reading is: is this fiction? In *The Fourth Estate*, James Wood said of Sebald that it was, because of the care and patterning of narration, the interiority, and the mixing of fact and invention to produce a fictional truth beyond verification. Garner discussed *The Spare Room*'s autobiographical basis in publicity interviews in the media. Wood's comment could be made of *The Spare Room*. But I do find myself agreeing with Peter Rose in *Australian Book Review*, that this may have been more 'convincing' as a long essay. See, for example, 'Woman in a Green Mantle' and 'Tower Diary' in *The Feel of Steel*, where the anguish and inconsolable sadness displayed on the pages over the break-up of a marriage are akin to that of a death.

'Hybrid creations are not singular' says Bail's philosopher in *The Pages*. I take this as a negative comment on hybridity, since, generally, singularity is seen as original and unique. Yet Bail's own works build, in part, via intertextual referencing.

Garner's fans say *The Spare Room* is fabulously spare, and 'Helen' is prepared to courageously reveal her horrid crabbiness. And while I myself am obsessed with linen and thence aesthetics, neither carries much weight at the time of death's own singular appearance. The Helen of the novel copes for only one week as a carer of her dying friend. A grueling week though it is, I am inclined to think of carers who conduct that grueling program for years. Moreover, the novel scrambles over the dying friend's stay at Melbourne's Windsor Hotel for extended medical treatment, with more friends for support. This seemed to me to have the potential for fiction, but I assume it's left out because it would not be from Helen's point of view. Among the most resonant fictional moments, because they are so poetic, are those that Helen shares with her granddaughter, Bessie:

She pointed out that many people in the world were very poor. Then, tucking into the bowl of yoghurt and nuts ... she observed that days differ from one another. "Some are happy," she said, "but others are bad. I don't know why ..."

Garner possibly acquires fans, Bail aficionados. Aficionados will recognise familiar Bail patterns in *The Pages*. It is set in the same anonymous west of the Blue Mountains in *Eucalyptus*. I barely remember my pre-Bail perception of the bush, so dominated is it now by Bail's representations, which may as well be Baudrillard's simulacra, except that Bail is usually classified as a modernist. For example, he has a commitment to originality and authorial status; he doesn't usually engage with critical approaches to gender or ethnicity; and he is concerned with representation.

Death is probably looming over *The Pages* too. In 1988 in *Liars*, Helen Daniel said of *Holden's Performance* that it was 'a poignant mediation on', among other things, 'being and becoming'. A list finishes off *Homesickness*, *Holden's Performance* and *The Pages*, and the latter's list is of the aphoristic thoughts of the self-styled dead philosopher, Wesley Anthill, which include 'We end up becoming' and '... we can't help being'. Anthill's aphorisms echo Holland's in *Eucalyptus*: '[there is] something rather than nothing' (Anthill); 'nothing is one' (Holland). Philosophy attempts to fathom existence, but Anthill's reader, Erica Hazelhurst, a professional philosopher, asked did he know how to live. Though there is an incipient romance between Erica and Wesley's brother, Roger, Roger is another in a long trail of Bail's stolid, inarticulate Anglo-Australian males. Wesley's not much better; he reads, thinks and writes, at least; but he's a bit of a womaniser - although why women find him attractive is utterly unfathomable - and, coming from a wealthy squattocracy, is indulged, never required to seriously earn a living. Still, he is engaged with the unsayable which, according to *The Pages*' narrator, composes much of the world.

Zoellner, a cast member in Bail's short stories and *Homesickness*, and who is also mentioned in *Eucalyptus*, makes another appearance in *The Pages*. Wesley meets Carl and George Kybybolite in Zoellner's bookshop, but in another city. As if locked in some time warp, or eternally trapped in some maze, I pulled out *Homesickness* to see if Anthill and the Kybybolites were hidden in its pages. (Until I checked, I thought at one point that Anthill's last written thoughts had come directly from Bail's *Notebooks*.) One of the sources of the Kybybolite brothers' surname is related to optics, and one brother has the authorship of *The Science of Appearances* by the painter, Max Meldrum, ascribed to him. Naming has always been a place for riddles in Bail's fiction, and so one necessarily thinks about Erica's surname, Hazelhurst: Bail's drover's wife is Hazel, and Erica is on the verge of coupling with the grazier, Roger Anthill. Anthill: obsessive construction in the dry bush? And the somewhat air-headed Sophie: sophistry? (This is another opportunity for pedagogy: the creation of character and Rimmon-Kenan's specification of the flat character as caricature, allegorical figure or type which can, still, have depth and complexity.)

Like *Holden's Performance*, *The Pages* is full of these quiet little riddles and jokes - for example, the postcards showing 'wooden boats pulled up on the beach' is bound to be something by Derain or Matisse since Anthill buys it at Collioure; and there are numerous references to famous philosophers texturising the novel's surface. It's what Lee Spinks in 1993, in an article in *Span* on Bail's use of allegory, has described as Bail's engendering of 'supplementary narratives' because of the double play of literal and allegorical meanings. When I read in *The Pages* that Erica wears a cardigan 'the colour of boiled rhubarb' and speckled green slacks, I was sent back to *Holden's Performance*, where I was certain that Harriet Chandler, who definitely wears pants, also wore a pair of the speckled-green variety (they're 'coarse green').

There's a spectacular passage in *Eucalyptus* where a dying man reviews his life in a kind of fast film; in *The Pages* such moments are speckled throughout: 'Brown lino shining'; 'Many lambs, pale'. It's something about seeing, naming or re-presenting, and understanding. Text's production of *The Pages* has deckled edges. (The design of *The Spare Room* is spare.) The page (even online, albeit symbolically) is the space of writing. It can be defined like a canvas. It is initially empty and usually white. But, like physical space, it isn't neutral. It has edges, shape, size and scale. It has airiness. Potentially, it has depth. And to make marks on it, to begin to name, classify, categorise, to re-present, to attempt to make meaning, to be and become, is a matter of life and death.

Moya Costello teaches at Southern Cross University. She has published two collections of short prose and one novel

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au