

## Prologue

There was never a time when multi-award-winning Australian novelist Thea Astley was not a writer. She began as a child, published on the children's page of the newspaper where her journalist father worked; as a teenager she wrote for her school's magazine; at university she joined Barjai, a group of young writers and artists that, in time, became one of the better known cultural organisations of the era, largely for having nurtured talents such as hers and poet Barrett Reid's. She was able to pursue her ambitions as a writer within this small informal group; by the time Astley was in her thirties the effort she made to 'carve out a good sentence', as she called it, was the consequence of more than two decades of writing.

Her first novel, *Girl with a Monkey*, published in 1958, dazzled with insight and wit. Further novels appeared almost every two years throughout the 1960s. By 1963 Thea Astley had her first Miles Franklin Award for fiction for *The Well Dressed Explorer*, a humorous

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but scarifying portrait of a philandering journalist. This firmly established her reputation as a sharp-eyed satirist of Australian social mores. By the end of the next decade she had picked up a further two Miles Franklin Awards (for *The Slow Natives* and *The Acolyte*) and a healthy clutch of other major literary prizes. Yet Astley spent her life suffering from an acute sense of being a writer who was out of favour, a sentiment that sits curiously alongside her visible success. When she received the Patrick White Award in 1989 – intended for writers who might not have received the recognition they deserved – Astley regarded it as confirmation of her failure.

While eccentric, this attitude can be understood. Astley's early literary role models, even from within her own family, were male (her artist-musician grandfather, her journalist father) and she also began writing at a time when, as Astley would later explain, women were supposed to emulate a 'masculine style' to succeed; that is, they were expected to conform to the ideals of strong narrative lines and the superior virtue of brevity. In Astley's writing there are tensions between the vulnerability of female existence and the manner of its telling.

It is astonishing to think that even by the mid-1980s Astley was already as much of a household name as any Australian writer can be, that is, in Australia. 'Australians loathe success that doesn't take place in a scrum,' she once said.<sup>1</sup> But what becomes of a writer's work when that writer is no longer alive? The relentless commerce of publishing, the thirst for the new, dictates much of that answer. Thea Astley was being published – and reviewed – in the United States, as well as in Australia. In all she wrote sixteen works of fiction in just under half a century. *Drylands*, published in 1999 when she was in her seventies, won her a fourth Miles Franklin Award (a feat shared only by Tim Winton).

Astley's books offer a rare and sustained engagement with the social and political realities of Australian life over more than forty years, particularly for women. She was no Christina Stead balancing

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typewriter on knee in shabby hotels across Europe, but at home in Australia Astley established an output in the same class, rarely taking time off before moving on to her next manuscript. She has influenced a generation of Australian women writers such as Helen Garner and Kate Grenville and is known for her support of the many younger writers who came within her orbit as a teacher.

Astley was a child of the Depression and she lived through World War II as a teenager; she was no stranger to ‘personal weather’, as she called it, the highs and lows that sweep through a life. Early experiences shaped her fiction: the Catholicism of the 1930s and 1940s; the presence of American GIs in wartime Brisbane. She also observed unhappy marriages; absent fathers; bachelor celibates; misfits and ‘runaways’ risking safety for the tropics. Her strong women of the later books (*It’s Raining in Mango*, *Reaching Tin River*, *Vanishing Points*, *Coda*, *Drylands*) manage without men but with stoicism and a certain panache. Sometimes Astley’s own anxieties and self-doubt creep into her prose, driving the narrative with particular force. Like the work of Christina Stead, Astley’s novels and short stories have a strong autobiographical element which she readily acknowledged: ‘They are 90% ME,’ she wrote, adding that, ‘When you’re writing a novel, you’re not writing about anything really except yourself’ and, ‘I work from life, as I know it, as I have known it.’<sup>2</sup> Astley’s characters can be like members of an extended family, reappearing from novel to novel. A typical Astley protagonist has drifted unawares into middle age (Astley herself once claimed to have been ‘arrested at forty-two’). Their will is seemingly suspended, their memory animated by usually hostile past events, while they await the decline of the ripened body.

In her work as in her life, Thea Astley was a fatalist. In public she could display a strange mixture of bombast and anxiety, be sentimental – reduced to tears by a recalled scene – yet blunt in her opinions, often mumbling a shambolic apology. She was a tangential thinker; her mind darted helter-skelter across an exotic range of concerns, but she was also possessed of a practical logic and an acute

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mind, and these were the housekeepers of her imagination.

This picture of a successful Australian woman novelist nevertheless has a shadow across it. There are many full-length literary biographies of Australian women writers, from Miles Franklin and Christina Stead to lesser-known writers like Eve Langley or Jean Devanny. Until now, inexplicably, a biography of Thea Astley was not in this list, ghosting her with the same neglect she felt in life.

Do writers welcome having their biographies written? History tells us that many have not. F. Scott Fitzgerald called biography ‘the falsest of arts’ and Henry James swore he would avoid such ‘literary scavengers’ as biographers.<sup>3</sup> Thea Astley was not strongly in favour of biography or against it, but she did regard herself as a very private person. When I contacted her in the mid-1990s about writing her biography she was happy to be interviewed, but, she said in a smoker’s rasp, ‘Don’t write your address on the back of any envelopes, will you? People might see – might know – that we are in touch.’ *But aren’t we?* I couldn’t help thinking. It took a moment to digest conspiracy and invitation in the same breath. I did come to understand this strange and contradictory behaviour but it is worth recalling this moment because it frames the central paradox of a work such as this: the story of a public person whose life was intentionally private.

Astley’s novels and stories have always fascinated me. They show a masterful blend of whimsy, the absurd and the deeply serious; her prose is energised by her irascible wit and there is a visceral, almost sexual energy in the nature of its swoops and silences that appeals to me. There is a pleasing perversity in the way she could bring seeming opposites into unison. Because writing this book took so many years, and I, too, have experienced many of life’s various upheavals, my enjoyment of her work has deepened.

When I began, I simply wanted to know more about the public writer Thea Astley. Of course Astley only went public as part of being a successful writer who receives awards and is a guest at book festivals, literary conferences and international symposiums. Astley

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would have characterised these as necessary obligations, despite the obvious pleasure she took in being part of them – or even being the star attraction.

Once she had left the working life that meant residing in Sydney, Astley chose remote places to live but she was not a hermit: she loved people, loved gossip. She was married for more than fifty years to Jack Gregson and gloried in recounting what she considered the absurd dreariness of domestic routines. The late-life gravelly voice, the wit, the warmth and engagement that distinguished Astley in person are not easily forgotten. She had the knack of making people feel that they were happily encountered confidants, special people with whom she needed to share herself.

Those who thought that they had come to know Thea Astley from such encounters were often surprised to find that others had the same experience. This is especially true of those students, writers or other young folk whom Astley tended to regard as protégé-children. Yet there was often a one-way intimacy in these friendships that belied their apparent candour; sometimes the chosen ones could see that perhaps they did not know Astley so well after all. They did and they didn't, to use a characteristic Astley phrasing. They knew her jokes, her gestures, fronts, defences. They knew how kind she could be – but they did not share in her private emotional world. Few did: from the start it belonged to her writing, as is true of many writers.

Astley grew up feeling at odds with the demands of her social world. She developed a defensive habit of mind early in life: her parents didn't especially get on, she had to handle the dictates of the strict Catholicism of her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, then loneliness as a young woman teaching in remote rural towns in the far north of her home state of Queensland and in the Mary Valley, closer to Brisbane. More than her circumstances seemed to justify, Astley came to see herself as set apart from others. She became guarded, nursed well-worn hurts and humiliations, vulnerabilities, anger and guilt. All these things were expressed in her fiction.

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Thea Astley is one of those writers who invite portraiture – such is the indelible impression of her personality inhabiting her prose.

This is the seduction of reading, this attraction between writers and readers that biography can give expression to. This book's portrait of the novelist includes the imperfect, glancing impressions of those who met and befriended Astley, those 'hints from everyone', as Christina Stead once called them.<sup>4</sup> Beyond skeletal facts, 'hints' are often all there is. Like many writers before her, Astley destroyed much of her written correspondence. For most of her life she preferred talking on the telephone. It is only because her death was more sudden than expected that some letters and other items were salvaged. In the end it was Astley who delivered the final instalment of her story, in her last novel, *Drylands*. It is a loosely assembled collage, but a knowing self-portrait.

Perhaps many of us carry around a sense of the world as insensitive to us, holding on to a story of ourselves that seems plausible, bearable, all the while pleading a special case: ours. It is true that I have tried to look in on Astley's private world and can offer only an interpretation of her life, but I have done so in the hope of understanding her lifelong private conversation with herself and how that shaped the distinctive body of work that is Thea Astley's literary legacy.