Appendix 1

Brian Castro – A Biographical Outline

Brian Castro likes to maintain his privacy, and is not an author who parades before his public. On the other hand, he also insists that there is a person behind every author, a living human being who does the writing. In keeping with Castro's wishes, I have provided only a biographical sketch to give some of the important details that are necessary in understanding how an author's biography interacts with the work he produces.

Brian Castro was born in Hong Kong in 1950 (actually, on a steamer plying between Hong Kong and Macau). His mother was English/Chinese and his father Portuguese/Spanish/English from Shanghai. As a young boy he was brought up by his father in a 'Western' tradition; he was not allowed to study Chinese at school but was fluent in English and Cantonese at home. He speaks English, Cantonese, French, and some Portuguese.

He migrated to Australia in 1961 to undertake his secondary schooling at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill. He was a boarder, but occasionally spent school holidays staying with friends' families in Sydney.

Castro completed his BA, DipEd at the University of Sydney (1970–73), and in 1976 was awarded an MA for his thesis on Norman Mailer.[1] Whilst at University he submitted material for publication in campus publications, and his short story 'Estrellita' won first prize in a *Union Recorder* competition in 1973.

Castro was not eligible for a Commonwealth Scholarship on grounds of his citizenship—he was a British subject—(although the Department of Defence saw no contradiction in trying to enlist him for National Service!). He therefore accepted a Teacher's Scholarship which bonded him for three years teaching in State schools. He taught at various schools and colleges in Australia and France, including Mt Druitt High School, Ingleburn High School, St Joseph's College at Hunters Hill, Lycée Technique in Aulnay, north of Paris, and Nepean College, which later became

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1 *The Relation Between Hero and Style in Norman Mailer's Novels*, unpublished MA thesis, The University of Sydney, January 1976

part of the University of Western Sydney. During the late 1970s and early 1980s he published many short stories, principally in literary journals.

In 1983 Castro's novel *Solitude* won the *Australian*/Vogel award for an unpublished manuscript (from the preceding year). (The award was shared with Nigel Krauth.) The novel, renamed *Birds of Passage,* was published in 1983 by Allen & Unwin. (It has subsequently been translated into French and Chinese.)

Several short stories were published during the 1980s, but it was not until 1990 that his second novel, *Pomeroy*, appeared in print, and he considered himself a full-time writer. *Pomeroy* was closely followed by *Double-Wolf* (1991), *After China* (1992) (all Allen & Unwin) and *Drift* (1994) (William Heinemann). His first four novels won a series of prizes, but *Drift*, despite being acclaimed by critics, failed to garner an award. In 1997 Castro published *Stepper* with Random House, winning the 1997 National Book Council 'Banjo' Award.

Castro lived for many years in the Blue Mountains in Sydney. He now lives in the Dandenong Ranges on the outskirts of Melbourne.

Writing has never provided a sufficient income, so Castro has supported his work with writer-in-residence sojourns, notably 12 months at the University of Hong Kong in 1994/95, and 6 months as Writing Fellow at the Australian Defence Force Academy, the Australian National University and Canberra University in late 1995. He has received support from the Australia Council. (He also served on the Literature Board from 1993 to 1995.)

Brian Castro's collection of essays, *Looking for Estrellita*, was published in September 1999, and a new 'memoir-novel', *Shanghai Dancing*, (which meshes concepts of fabulation and autobiography) is expected in 2000.

Appendix 2

Brian Castro's Short Stories

Brian Castro has written over fifty short stories, approximately twenty-four of which have been published in smaller literary magazines.[2] The first, Estrellita, appeared while he was still a student at Sydney University, in the *Union Recorder*. He has also written one dramatic monologue, *Nightsafe Area,* which was broadcast on the ABC (13 July 1995) and has been published in revised form in *Heat*. A mini-play for one actor, *Secrets*, has been published and was performed as part of the 1994 Sydney Festival.[3]

Castro does not consider himself a short story writer, and their highly experimental nature suggests that they were a means of finding and developing his own style. (By the same token, he does not write poetry. His only examples appear to be student pieces published in University publications and unpublished poems amongst his literary papers, and the occasional verses inserted into his novels. He has said that he has attempted to write poetry but was unsuccessful in his own judgement.[4])

It is readily apparent that the short form does not suit Castro. Although he is capable of writing very dense and compact prose, he needs the larger canvas of the novel to work out his narrative ideas. He describes his short stories (as a whole) as being 'extracts'. 'I realised that all my short stories were episodes of fiction in a larger work. … they are not the traditional short story, they don't have that self-containedness. They always have a larger reference.'[5]

He uses elsewhere the phrase 'preparation for a larger work', and some of the ideas and material of the short stories have been reworked into later novels. An example

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2 Although my list of published stories appears to be comprehensive, it is not possible to be definitive on the number published. For example, I have included dramatic monologues but excluded extracts from work-in-progress. Some pieces have been published in more than one publication.

3 Published in *RePublica*. The play was performed as part of Carnivale's 'Flesh and Blood: Six Monologues on the Theme of the Family', by actor John Derum. Bob Evans, in his review 'Fine Writing that Rates a Longer Life' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1994, p. 19), noted that 'the [six] writers tackle those questions … with varying degrees of success. The most complete, satisfying and theatrically sophisticated solutions are presented in Brian Castro's *Secrets* …'

4 See ADFA reading; Appendix 4

5 Interview MD, 29 November 1997; Appendix 8

is 'The Cave', which is about a boy coming to Australia by himself to start school. This story was incorporated into his unpublished novel *After the Deluge*. It is not possible to say whether 'Carried Away on a Flower Boat', published separately and also used as a chapter in *After China,* was written before and then 'generated' *After China*, or was excised from the novel to stand as a short story.

In an interview I suggested to Castro that 'a lot of [your short stories] look like exercises—you are trying something out', and he agreed.

> They always look like extracts from a novel and I think that's the way I also see short stories. They are a preparation for a larger work, they are glimpses of a larger work—even though the larger work may never be written, and may not exist. That's why I like short stories that are not well-rounded or don't have a point at the end.[6]

Closure seems to be a source of difficulty for Castro. Quite often the novels do not have an obvious sense of closure, and some of the short stories basically do not 'end'. When I related to Castro that I had reached the bottom of the last page in one of his stories and then thought I had forgotten to photocopy the last page, he simply laughed: '… unfortunately [it's a] form that really restricts … I find short stories even more restrictive than a 300 page novel, in the sense that there are certain expectations, you know, that at the end … especially the last line …'[7]

Some of the stories are confusingly experimental. Some work quite well. They are more often 'meditations' rather than mini-narratives with a story-line. They begin *in media res* as does most of his work, and are usually internal psychological musings—in Chapter 4 I have quoted him talking of wanting to get the reader straight into the feeling of the story:

> Within the sentence itself I want to bring you there. I want to bring you, within that sentence, to not only just a place but a framework of mind. So you are entering somebody's mind.[8]

There is certainly no wasted scene setting, and his more difficult short stories are as baffling and opaque as his toughest novels. On the other hand, some of the stories manage a delicate lyricism. But virtually none of them could be called self-

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6 Interview MD, 29 November 1997
7 Interview MD, 29 November 1997
8 Interview MD, 29 November 1997

contained. They are very much extracts, and as Castro's confidence as a novelist has grown, so he has gradually abandoned the short story.

Brian Castro's published short stories

(In chronological order, with place of publication and year. Complete publishing details are provided in the Bibliography.)

'Estrellita', *Union Recorder,* 1973
'The Man Who Breathed', *New Literature Review*, 1975
'Writing from the Clinic', *Mattoid*, 1980
'Mythos', *The Hat Trick: Australian Short Stories*, 1981
'Indolent Notes Towards Heaven', *inprint*, 1981
'Miniatures', *Nepean Review*, 1982
'A Ten Minute Story into the Night', *Going Down Swinging*, 1982
'Three Hemingway Pieces', *Nepean Review*, 1982 [Short Story Competition First Prize]
'The Tyranny of Form', *Brave New World*, 1982
'The Last Card Game', *inprint*, 1982
'The Cave', *Meanjin*, 1983
'Grand Master', *Outrider*, 1985
Displacements 2: Multicultural Storytellers, 1987
'Death of a Morphologist', *Australian Book Review*, 1992
Microstories, 1993
'Carried Away on a Flower Boat', *Scripsi*, 1992
'Portfolio', *A Corpse at the Opera House: a Crimes for a Summer Christmas Anthology*, 1992
Sydney Review, 1992
'You Must Remember This', *Picador New Writing*, 1993
'Poet's Ridge', *Murder at Home: a Crimes for a Summer Christmas Anthology* 1993
'Drift', *Harbour: Stories by Australian Writers*, 1993
'Sonatina', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1994
'Secrets', [drama], *All Same as Family in a Big 'Ouse: RePublica [1]*, 1994
'Shanghai-Dancing', *Risks*, 1996
'Nightsafe Area', [dramatic monologue] *Heat* 3, 1997
'Hopscotch', *A Sporting Declaration*, 1996
'The Pillow Book',[with Peter Lyssiotis] *Heat*, No.11, 1999 pp. 76-85

Brian Castro's unpublished short stories

This list is based on typescripts and manuscripts deposited with Brian Castro's papers in the Mitchell Library. It is not necessarily a complete list of unpublished stories, and is included here only as an indication that there are many stories that were finished to a nominally publishable stage but which did not appear in print. Most of these stories are undated, and many appear in multiple copies.

A Father's Tale
A Vignette
Adam …
Among the People
Anniversary Waltz
Aspects of a Writing Career
Beginnings
'Black Ass' (Notes on a Happy Death)
Bleating Goats and Rabbis
Carnations
Falling
Ghosts
I Have a Dream
La Palizzata
Madrigal
Manhunter
Short Ends
Soft, Secret Cards
Starfish
'Stultifera Navis'
The Coinov Affair
The Legacy
The Museum
The Poetry of Poets
The Son
Theodorus
Uncle Pat's Radio
Violin Days

Appendix 3

Interview with Maeve O'Meara

Dateline, SBS TV, 4 July 1991

[The opening of the interview is missing on the videotape held at ADFA]

O'Meara: *… truth that you decided to become a writer? Somehow that you felt that it was your destiny?*

Castro: Yes, there were moments of truth but they occurred regularly. I think when I was about 15 or 16 I began to write, but of course the idea of being a writer is not something that enters your mind immediately because it's certainly not a livable kind of job—it's more a vocation, I think, than a profession as such.

And has it been fulfilling to be a full-time writer?

Oh very much so. You get a different view because you become far more confident as a person who's doing something worthwhile.

READING
'I hear the voices of children rattling the panes as another afternoon comes to its end. [OMITTED: The shadows of leaves and patches of light dart about behind the curtains. A strong wind is blowing. I hope it will not rain.] There is a strangeness about the coolness, the leaves, the night ready to open up its secret grottoes, all the fragrances of solemnity. In the sadness of this early evening I am aware of the shapes of dreams departing.'

[from *Birds of Passage*, page 4]

There's a lot woven into your books. They're very, very complex books. Do they evolve or are they planned?

No. There is a vague sort of idea but I don't like the idea of making detailed plans because for me that is like joining up the dots and a novel must always be a process of discovery and I think at times when you are writing you feel that risk, that slight

edge to what you do. Maybe it will come off, maybe it won't, and I think that is what keeps you going, that's the excitement of it.

VOICE-OVER
Brian Castro grew up in Hong Kong, the son of a Portuguese banker cum jazz musician and an Anglo-Chinese mother. He spent the first eleven years of his life in the colony and some of his teenage years, all of which he says has given him an edge as a writer.

I've always felt the kind of double perspective which I think I'm fortunate to have, and that is that even though I've lived here [Australia] for thirty years I still have the perspective of being the insider as well as the outsider. Several things occur to me: for instance, walking up the street, meeting people who don't know me, people would speak very slowly and loudly [laughs] in case I don't understand English. So that is a little disconcerting, but I can kind of cope with it now after thirty years. I can understand a migrant straight off the 'plane, who speaks English, having to cope with this. I guess that'll all change in the future.

READING
'When I first returned to Hong Kong it was as a tourist. That was the only way I could learn to live there again. Gone was that other place of old China, the rickshaws, the slow ramshackle docks and the cheap eatery stalls. Gone the stubby colonial buildings, the post office with its clock at the Star Ferry, the police barracks, the playing fields. The air was heavy with pollutants, the harbour water green and viscous. Buildings were taller and trees were dying, Nathan Road, once a leafy boulevard at the harbour end, was now a busy market thoroughfare. But I was glad there were still beggars, there were still tourists and there was still a greasy layer of humanity beneath the cut-throat exterior.'

[from *Pomeroy* p. 10]

What aspects of life particularly intrigue you? What do you really like writing about?

Well I'm interested in the extremes of character, for instance, in the extremes of people's lives. I find that also up here in Katoomba. You've got your luxury resorts and your beautiful guest houses occupying the most wonderful views, and then back towards the town you've got people who are unemployed, single parents,

people who are depressed, so you've got the two extremes and that interests me also.

READING

'A misty rain is falling.
It smears the glass like somebody's spit.
[elision]
The mist drifts into old boarding houses, finds the damp courses, settles into rotting floorboards, drips into the stew of vegetation underneath.'

[from *Double-Wolf*, page 1]

Do you tend towards the dark side, do you think?

[Laughing] Oh I think every writer has a dark side. I guess I'm not so much interested but controlled by forces of, say, depression, and things like that. Sometimes I think those things are important because unless you have to ask yourself very hard questions about things I feel that you won't come up with the kind of truths that you need for your writing.

You've been compared to Patrick White and you've had a lot of accolades. How do you react to that?

Well I think that the Patrick White comparison obviously is about the subject matter because *Double-Wolf*, my latest novel, is about psychoanalysis, and it's about sexuality, and things like that, which Patrick White explored to an immense degree. I think that was the comparison. When I first started writing I remember reading White's early novels and saying 'This is something *entirely* different'. This was very inspirational for me. So he more or less gave the kickstart that I needed so I am very, very indebted to White for that.

Appendix 4

Brian Castro reads his poetry [*sic*] at ADFA

25 July 1991
ADFA av video PR 9691.3.C379 B74 19
(This video is included in a series of poets reading their poetry,
hence the mis-titling)

[Brian Castro is introduced to the audience by Susan Lever and then reads for about 20 minutes from *Double-Wolf*.]

Castro then explains: 'The book is composed of short chapters—in the form of a collage—so it's very difficult to get a straight narrative. So what I am going to do is read several scenes. The first is entitled "Primal Scene". When Freud psychoanalysed the Wolfman he said that the dream of wolves came from an earlier historical event which he called a primal scene.'

Reading begins with 'Primal Scenes' on page 38 'Sergei's mother knew nothing about a trip in a rowboat …' and goes to 'Anna is hiding, forever hiding.' on page 46. It then skips to chapters and restarts with 'Dream, 1890' on page 51, 'I have a dream.' and ends with the Wolfman giving Freud an 8th Century BC Greek statue of Priapus — 'In time,' Freud said, 'this will become a link between us', page 53.

[The audience then asked questions, which are hard to hear on the tape because only Castro was recorded by direct microphone. The questions as recorded here are approximations of what was asked and may not be verbatim.]

When did you start writing [Double-Wolf], Brian?
I think it was in gestation for over ten years. It began around 1978, actually, when I was teaching in France, and I was on a railway station, and they were making the film *Julia* at that stage. And when the film came out I didn't think anything of it, but I realised it was based on one Muriel Gardiner who was a psychoanalyst and who was the Wolfman's confidante and who also protected him from publicity. So much so that nobody realised that the Wolfman was actually alive and living in Vienna up until 1976 [in *Double-Wolf* Castro says Wespe *died* in 1979].

So it was through a very diligent journalist Karin Obholzer who tracked him down through a series of photographs—she found the embossed photographer's mark on the back of one of them and tracked down the photographer and realised his son was still running the business in Vienna, and so she was able to get a hold of the Wolfman's address and interview him.

Now having read that interview I suddenly found out that he was harbouring an ambition to be a writer, although what he said about his manuscripts may have been a fiction.

So it led me to thinking that perhaps the Wolfman himself was inventing himself all the way along with Freud, in psychoanalysis sessions. That perhaps he was a writer who needed to recompose or recreate himself each time he went to Freud. He was the only patient that Freud actually paid, because he had been a Russian aristocrat and when of course the Russian Revolution took place he became a pauper. So Freud paid him—whether it was out of generosity or … What I interpret that as is a bribe [chuckles] because Freud found out too late that this guy had been duping him all along, so all his theories like the Castration Complex and Infantile Neurosis—very basic theories of psychoanalysis—were based on this particular case. And realising he was duped it was too hard to go back and renege [laughs]. So that was the basic idea of when it all began. I put pen to paper I suppose in about 1988. I took about two, two-and-a-half years to research and write.

[QUESTION INAUDIBLE – possibly:]
Was there any reaction from the psychiatric community?
[Laughs] No, but there is an American academic called Geoffrey Mason—who, believe it or not, is a Sanskrit scholar but who became a psychoanalyst—and unearthed some papers, some letters from Freud to Fliess, and apparently these letters were suppressed but these letters were Freud expressing a certain trepidation or apprehension at the fact that many of his patients had been abused sexually as children, and that he couldn't face this, having developed his theories and everything. Perhaps it was the mores of the times that prevented him doing so. And Mason more or less suggested that Freud went along the route of his analysis without facing this prospect at all and tried to suppress the whole seduction theory. So in this case, the Wolfman, I have no firm evidence, but the reason for his sister's suicide had never been explained satisfactorily. And so I more or less used a certain poetic licence there by suggesting—not in too malicious a tone, I hope—that some abuse had taken place.

Can I ask you about style? There is quite a remarkable development in writing style from Birds of Passage *to subsequent novels. I was just wondering if you would like to say briefly how that style developed.*

Well I think after *Birds of Passage* I went into terminal failure mode [laughs] and I wrote a very large manuscript of 700 pages which was based … —very realistic, naturalistic almost—and found that (a) few publishers were interested in a book about science and (b) that it was something that I think I invested so much creative energy into and I was fairly disappointed with the reactions. So I needed to more or less drag myself up by my bootlaces in another direction. And I thought, well, there is this other side of me, that is … I am a great admirer of Joyce and Beckett and that kind of almost black humour, so I started writing in this semi-serious vein using puns and playing on words and things like that, and it developed into *Pomeroy*. *Pomeroy* was a book in which I decided to throw everything out the window, all the realism and the spareness of my prose, and sort of use a baroque method, where elaborating, constantly elaborating, on figures—metaphors and figures of speech—… And I found that there was a certain way of doing it where you can loop back the metaphor along the line. I don't know whether that sounds gobbledegook or not, but when you use a certain figure of speech most people, most users of it, don't tend to exhaust its possibilities, so I tried to attain a method whereby you could exhaust every possible meaning from it by sort of looping it back and creating an extra one-liner from it. So I think that's how the style began with *Pomeroy* and with *Double-Wolf*. But in the next manuscript [*After China*?] I have gone back more or less to the sparer style because I think one can only do that sort of writing to a certain extent.

I read Thomas Pynchon, for instance, and to go on that long with that kind of long breath as it were, without a full stop or comma, is great for a few pages but after a while I think it pales and you are just trying to endure the book. So I try to mix the two. I don't know whether it's too hard a mixture or not but I try to have the realistic narrative, the spareness, the story telling, and then I go into these waves of lyricism.

[QUESTION INAUDIBLE – possibly:]
So Double-Wolf *is 'Pynchon style'?*

Yes, I think the whole book is a kind of dance between intuition and reason. Les Murray made a very important remark, I thought. When he wrote poetry, he said, you have got to write it with the back of your brain. The forebrain tends to take over too much. And when I wrote this book [*Double-Wolf*] I found myself not

struggling so much as 'dancing' between that forebrain and that backbrain trying to reach certain things in the darkness in the back brain and then coming forward and analysing, and looking at Freud himself and the way Freud analysed, because I think that he, in an ingenious fashion, was able to take literature—Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*—and take a lot of literature and turn it into psychoanalytic theory, and to do that you must have control not only I think of the literary consciousness which is the back brain I suppose, and to use your forebrain, your analytical skills. So reading Freud I found that a lot of it was very enjoyable narrative.

Are you interested in film?
Yes, I'm a great film-goer. I think that in my writing that people have suggested that it's like painting or a film. I'm not so sure how … I'm not conscious of operating at that level but, yes, things do happen in 'scenes', in a kind of collage fashion almost.

Directors use changes of pace in order to maintain interest. It seems to me that it's something that you do.
There are sections in the book where I have headings called photos—these are narrative photos—so, yes, that visual sense is there.

What effect did it have on your use of and understanding of time? I've always taken time to be the thing the novelist has to master; chronology, flashbacks, and so on. Photo-narrative would seem to be the employment of time. Do you, in the course of the three novels you have written … have you developed any sense of the way in which you use time that is characteristic to yourself?
I think I have a sense of focussing, as you say, on specific moments rather than setting it in a historical context. I am very wary … I am really not interested in the historical novel or the fictional biography where you are actually kind of shackled to time and its modes.

However I think in *Double-Wolf* the scheme that I really had in mind was that Art Catacomb, who was the ghost writer of the Wolfman's life, is performing a sort of Leopold Bloom of Katoomba. He's sort of going from pub to bookshop and he is going back in time and reaching out at the same time to other parts of the world in his memoirs, in his thinking back … I think one needs to when playing around with time (anyway, for me) to have a focus and a position from which you can control it. So Katoomba 1978— Catacomb's peregrinations—it always comes back to him. So it's not a kind of free-for-all, how would you say, a freestyle into time and playing with time.

But time itself is something that I've been interested from Borges's essay 'Refutation of Time' where he talks about David Hume. I've been fascinated by that and by the way that someone like Borges can use concepts of time in a more than imaginative way, I think, in an almost essayistic way, if you like.

So I've been toying with that as well. I know the word 'toy' sounds very frivolous. It gives an impression that it's not serious. However, I think there is an element of non-seriousness that is serious. It's just not 'humour'.

Have you written poetry?
I have tried, and failed! On my own terms of course, but I've failed. I think the poem again is … a single mind. My mind is little bit more schizophrenic, if you like. There are other voices coming, other ideas, other languages almost, whereas a poem has got to be very focussed on one particular mind, I think. I find myself failing at that.

Appendix 5

Interview with Dinny O'Hearn

***The Bookshow*, 1993**

Australian Writers 1: SBS video SBB03
State Library of NSW: VB 7071

[*After China* had just been published.]

O'Hearn: *Let's begin with* Double-Wolf. *It seems to me a book essentially about play and games? Would I be very wrong in saying that?*

Castro: No, you are dead on. One of the great influences on my writing life has been Joyce, and when Joyce said that he was going to provide some clues in his book *Ulysses* for professors for a hundred years to work out, well that was the challenge. [laughs]

All those PhDs!

It's a terrifically playful book. I don't think there's anything serious in it at all.

Oh there are some *things in it that are serious. I also found it a 'dirty' book. I think you write about some topics that people have skimmed over in their reviews. If I challenge you with writing almost 'filth', what would you say about that?*

Again, Joyce is the influence. I plead 'Joyce'! No, I think that it is a sort of rebelliousness in me, Dinny, from years back.

It's clear that you have this great love of language. You also have a great love of puns. They're not very much in fashion these days, are they?

No, I think that's exactly what's wrong with novels that are being written at this time. They're very serious and there's no humour in them. You're always looking

for the humour. People are going into issues—too serious about issues and messages—when in fact language is something to be played with.

Except that you do show a number of themes that run through your work. For example, the theme of margins and borders. Has that got to do with your own background, in Australia, as a migrant?

Yes, very much so, because I come from so many different nationalities—you name it, I've got it! Just to gloss over that a little, my father was from Spanish and Portuguese, and also comes from an Irish background: two generations back they are from Lincolnshire, and back from that from Cork. My mother's side—it's all Chinese and British, so we had ancestry from Liverpool; my grandmother was a Liverpool missionary who came to China as a Baptist and tried to convert the Chinese, and met a Chinese man, and so it went. So I have this incredible background. But at the same time it's a bit of a problem. You are working from so many different angles.

Well you also in your books look at not just the linearity of time but you look at linearity as a way of culture. In Double-Wolf *you say if you take a longitudinal look at Russia, on this side you've got the West, and on this side—in block letters—THE ORIENTAL, and you go on and talk about the oriental as a different way of perceiving the world—a more arabesque way of perceiving the world—and that filters through, it seems to me, all your works; that perception of the arabesque in the world. Would you agree with that?*

Yes. Having spent the first ten years of so of my life in the East I saw that people were solving problems in a very lateral way. You take a Chinese farmer: he doesn't have machinery, he doesn't have tractors, he uses his body, and he uses very primitive tools, but these things do the work in a small way. In our Western way of looking at things we are always thinking big. We are always trying to solve and analyse problems, when in fact perhaps life is a certain turning around rather than 'progressing' in this railroad track way. I suppose it works the same way with my novels. I don't see the novel going from A to B to C. I've probably been criticised for this, but nevertheless.

In all your novels you bring at least one of your characters, sometimes several, constantly back to Australia. Is that a contrivance?

No it's perfectly natural. I live here, I write from here, and it's very difficult to set something *entirely* from abroad and beyond. I like the spice of having the foreign as well as the familiar. I get all my inspiration here. But again I've found that best way of writing about Australia is to be fairly distant from it, so if you can get two cameras working on your perspective you can jump backwards and forwards, and I always feel that if I don't bore myself then I don't bore my reader.

You show a remarkable facility, however, with at least three different cultures. A lot of your work is based deeply in European culture—not just James Joyce, but the French eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists—and most of Double-Wolf *is set in Vienna—which you evoke quite marvellously—but also Eastern culture. How do you manage all that? With Australian culture being the third. Is there any clash between these, or do they come together neatly for you, or do you have to force them at the corners?*

I don't find any clash. I find that if you tread lightly you can stand in the middle of this confluence of several rivers without being washed away. And I think that's the clue to it—if you tread lightly. If you become too serious and too intent upon fixating on a certain thing and forming a position, then I think you end up in a no-win situation … you can't flow from it.

And yet one of your themes is in fact going backwards. I mean you make a great joke of it, you make a sexual joke of it all through Double-Wolf. *There is something about the past which haunts and you want to savour and make it permanent.*

Yes, I think history itself is a very frightening notion. If you look at the horrors of our century—I don't want to be moralistic about it—but if you look at the horrors of our century, history itself has the capacity to frighten and to terrorise. That plays a big part in my subconscious, I think mainly because having been born in a different place, in a place that was politically insecure for quite some time, you don't realise until you actually live in Australia what a secure and comfortable place this is. When you have experienced riots and political turmoil you always carry this around with you. With my parents as well, because they passed this on to me, having gone through the war and concentration camps.

So in fact in After China *you do write quite formally about a spell in prison …*

Yes

… In Double-Wolf *you write about the turmoil of the October Russian Revolution. How do you avoid … I would have imagined with your background that you would write* more *about politics. Do you try to push it to one side?*

I try to push it to one side because I don't think that's the province of the novel. The novel may have as its ostensible matter politics, but to really delve into that to a great degree would be to compromise yourself. I always feel that the novelist has to have ambiguity and it's that ambiguity that gives you your vision in the long run. If you come down too strongly on one side or if you declare certain influences and positions and ideologies, you are not only alienating half your readers virtually, but at the same time you are making yourself a proselytiser.

Why your interest in the criminal element?

Well, probably back to what I said: rebellion. [laughs] It's anarchy, Dinny! But as Graham Greene said, the dangerous individual is harmless if a society is not corrupt, and I think that in a society that is not corrupt the dangerous and disturbed individual, whether he be a character in a novel or otherwise, is a cathartic element. He is the eccentric; the catharsis of seeing and meeting somebody like that is very important to our notion of stability and balance.

Appendix 6

Interview with Louise Adler

***Arts Today*, ABC Radio National, 14/4/97**

Adler: *This Monday we're profiling an award-winning writer, Brian Castro …*

Stepper. *It's Brian Castro's sixth novel. It's the story of a spy. It's also a story of love and betrayal. Victor Stepper is an espionage agent—he's a man of the moment, a cipher.*

Once an ardent Communist, twice a Fascist. Stepper and Castro lead the hapless reader a merry dance. I'm curious though, because the novel, it seems, is underpinned by the conventions of the spy genre, but the real content is to be found in much more enigmatic images: making love to a girl with one leg shorter than the other; Stalin nodding off while a cigar burns between his fingers; a stutterer struggling to say 'cunningly'.

This is classic Castro turf. All his novels have taken up history and spun it the other way. All of his novels have taken up this question of chaps, their writing and their penises. We're going to hear a lot about penises this week, but this morning we're talking to Brian Castro. Stepper *seems to me, in many ways to be Brian Castro's finest work. There's a lightness to this really elegant Australian writing—and probably some of the best writing I've read in ages. Brian Castro, welcome to* Arts Today.

Castro: Thank you Louise.

I'm curious, really curious, about the origins of Stepper. *I wonder how the story came to you.*

The story came to me through Jim Sharman who gave me this gift as it were, because while he was producing *Hair* in Tokyo in the 1970s, suddenly a woman in her 60s, a very beautiful Japanese woman, walked up to him at the end of a performance and said 'I used to be the cover of a soviet spy'. And Jim said, 'Look

Brian, you've got to make something of this. Can I trust you with this story? And normally when people say that you step back and you wait and you say 'Look I don't think I could really go with this'. Jim followed this up and he said meet me in Tokyo and we did. Meet me in Tokyo in 1994 at the Prince Hotel in Shanagawa[?] and we would go off on a search for this woman. And we did. We went to the Australian Embassy, we got through Japanese contacts, we made arrangements, but it never eventuated—she claimed she was sick or something and don't forget she used to be the wife of a spy, so a writer would be the last person she would want to talk to. Anyway we didn't make contact, but I knew then that I had a story; and I knew that this was a true story, so I based the novel on the skeleton, as it were, of this truth.

At one point in the novel you write 'Stepper saw himself as a stepping stone, to where? He was stitching a quilt over the tundra, warming the hearts of the workers of the world'. Who is he?

Stepper is an enigma, like most spies. I think the interesting thing about him is that he was a very ambitious spy. He wanted to be the master spy. And I don't think there is more of an oxymoron than that. I mean the more you want to be ambitious and a spy, the more you will be discovered! So … [both laughing].

Classic Castro turf, I would have said, again.

Yes, it's the kind of paradox that I like.

The novel spins from Tokyo, through to California, and Australia. You dash across the whole of the twentieth century. I wondered, though, whether it's the realist world, the naturalism, that it's the starting point … a device you want to play with. Because when I was reading it I was thinking 'This would actually have made a riveting conventional thriller.' But you do something else altogether with it.

Yes. I wanted to use it as a vehicle to examine desire and betrayal. My main character—not the main character but the narrator of the novel is actually a Japanese who was a member of the spy ring and who is now rewriting Stepper's memoirs. So he is writing himself into history. Now he is a character who is basically of a lesser talent. Wanting to subvert this ambition and pushing himself into history. So Isaku, the Japanese character is going through this very vexed problem that I think Japan itself is going through and that is that of a kind of

acknowledgement of history or not acknowledgement of history, and the rewriting of it. I mean, it happens here in Australia too—you know with the Aborigines.

So you talk about betrayal. This is a novel really dogged by the business of betrayal. Stepper is a man outside principles, isn't he? An opportunist for every moment. I wondered though, whether that life lived in a moment as opposed to living with the memory of the past and a sense of history is what makes this underneath a very elegant novel and kind of wonderful writing style, actually quite chilling reading.

Thank you [laughs]

That's all right, you can blush!

[laughs] I'm blushing!

This is the one good thing about radio—no-one knows if you blush.

I think that's the effect I wanted to achieve. But also the fact is, I think Stepper is seen in a whole lot of mirrors, mirrors with cracks in them and that is basically how one gets to understand a spy. A spy can never come to terms with his real existence and I suppose I was investigating these things, too—like 99% of the time that we are in our jobs we are really being quite inauthentic—we are playing some role. Some people play it more than others. But nevertheless, in order to find that real authenticity sometimes we encounter a terrible emptiness and I think that, at the centre of this book, this is what he encounters, and in order to transcend that, he needs to look very, very closely at this emptiness and I think he does make an attempt, via suicide almost.

But one of the ways in which he finds authenticity, Stepper, is through his erotic life. In fact the narrator you mentioned before marvels—everybody seems to marvel at his sexual prowess. Is it in the hectic repetition of desire that Stepper … is that the only place in which he feels safe and remade?

Yes, I think that he is also trying to re-write himself into some sort of sexual, erotic history and he —

And he's successful, isn't he; he has sex with almost anyone.

The rumours are that there were 36 women in his life—that's not many really I suppose—partly Louise, if I can confess here, it's partly based on my father, who was very much in this vein, and as a child I used to collaborate without knowing in all of his assignations.

Now, that's pulled me up so to speak. But Stepper's desire, let's leave papa aside, Stepper's desire finds its match in Reiko, the dance-hall girl. It's a highly erotic and charged relationship. Why don't you read us the moment when they meet, because I think that sets the style of the book marvellously.

[Castro reads]

I thought you'd finish with this, and it's a paragraph on: 'In the beginning a concurrence of thought and desire, love and passion, but once taken the next step is emptiness and ever afterwards a futile retrieval of the original state.' I thought that's where you'd end this reading Brian.

I thought I'd talked about that.

I'd like you to continue to talk about that. Why is it that here he finds love?

Because I think there is a mixture of his being in love with Japan at the same time, I know this sounds again paradoxical, because he's spying against Japan, but he falls in love with all the things that Japan offers and that is the kind of ritualistic gestures, you know, I mean, Roland Barthes did say that this was the empire of signs; people made gestures out of a form of ambiguity. But beneath the gesture there may be nothing. He falls in love with her Japaneseness to start with —it's a kind of orientalism, the exotic, the offer, but suddenly recovers that fact that she is a human being, and in the end finds that she is much stronger than he is as a character. She is the weak little Madama Butterfly that the West likes to see as the epitome of Japanese women.
When she walks all over the fine porcelain cups, there is blood everywhere. There are also a lot of limbs around this novel, strewn everywhere, amputees, legs that don't match, tripping over oneself, unsteadiness—what's with the legs?

Well people can put a foot wrong, in spying you can't and even before Stepper gets to the gallows you have that little joke from him where he says 'Is this thing safe?' when he is going to step into nothingness forever.

You enjoy that kind of thing don't you, the gag that continues to torture the reader.

Well it's a bit sanguine I think.

Well Stepper*, like many of your novels, is absolutely obsessed with the fiction of history, writing and lying, what you remember and what you forget. Do you see the continuity between novels that you have written?*

Well I think that after six novels, Louise, even in the practical sense, you've got to start inventing a few things. No, it's more the fact that basically I think, as a writer, I'm talking about writing itself, you are lying and you are distorting truths, but you are creating and generating a fictional truth, and I think that in a way readers sometimes lose sight of that—that you are striving for a different kind of truth. You are not trying to say that this exactly happened, or that exactly happened.

It's the least interesting part about it, isn't it, that kind of parallel between history and fiction. The craft of writing fiction is about leaving history there and doing something with it. In Drift *you threw the English writer B.S. Johnson into the Tasmanian landscape. I thought at times it was a hilarious parody of the literary life. Here in* Stepper *it's as if you've thrown yourself at the spy genre. Is this the Castro double-gaze, to look at genre and then to write something else again?*

Yes, I feel that genre intends to imprison you and people do it for money and that's fine, but I find that genre is a kind of—it's prison-bars, it stops you from investigating those in-between areas, those borders, those lines that you need to move between. I've always kind of played with that idea. By the same token, the spy genre itself, when I read some of those books, bored me to death. There was so much information, it was a kind of info-tainment and I wasn't really interested in that, so I guess I'm just working to my own nature.

And the formulaic quality to that genre would, I suppose, not have interested you particularly.

Not at all. I actually did sub-title this book, which was wisely edited out, as 'Not a Spy Story'.

I don't think publishers like that sort of thing. It's far too hard.

Now talking about jokes, things that make you laugh. In Drift *you ask the reader 'do you get my drift' at the end of the book. A joke that's made me giggle—I suppose I shouldn't be giggling at the same joke. There are also moments of jokes here, like that one where Stepper is approaching the gallows, and he asks about how safe the stairs are. Irony and wittiness. When I've been thinking about you and the writing and the jokes you make, that they depend on our complicity. We have to agree to accept the authorial voice, don't we, and you can't capitulate; I can't be half with you, I've got to be completely with you in order to get this joke.*

Yes, well it's a form of collaborative enterprise with the writer and the reader, and it is a form of transaction as well because the writer can fail you and you endure a loss, but nevertheless, I think that my jokes and everything, behind my jokes there is a kind of moral seriousness, and not many people can actually latch onto that.

Because it's, in a sense, what you represent in terms of the literary and establishment community in this country is something quite problematic really, there is displacement, and there is a reluctance to capitulate, either to forms or to the protocol, I mean, this is a rare interview, you don't like doing interviews, I know you are painfully shy and want to really be left alone basically. It's almost too difficult getting you on the phone; it's hard to get to talk to you about a book. Is that because you want to say, 'This is my enterprise' something about the way you write which is uncompromising.

Yes. It think that's there certainly. But also that the fact of being, and I don't want to play on that too much, of being a migrant, all my life, even in my childhood, when I first came to Australia, I had to play an inauthentic game. In those days there was no such thing as multiculturalism, you had to be assimilated, integrated or whatever. So I became a rugby-playing ocker, in order to fit in. You had to in boarding school, so this whole idea of authenticity strikes within me against the grain, so I'm always writing against the grain. I think that's what probably made me into a writer. A migrant, too, is a voyeur, you tend to watch things, you tend to eavesdrop, you tend to be the outsider who is gathering all this information.

Is it because you talk about authenticity going against your brain, is it because it is not possible to know what authenticity is, given your history?

Yes, well, also it's compounded by the fact that I'm a writer. Writers are constantly inventing things, so you are living quite a painful relationship with real life as it

were, and I can understand writers who cross the gaps as it were, who take their characters off into reality.

I'm interested in your position within the literary establishment. You've won a string of awards, you are probably one of the most awarded writers, younger writers, in this country. (I'm calling you young because you and I are both very young. Never mind what my technical producers would say.) But it seems to me that in a sense what is being written here in Australia doesn't have a place for the displaced narratives that you've been interested in consistently.

I think that is a kind of mythology that people have felt bound to celebrate and that is this whole idea of the Australian literary setting and I've always found that my place was somewhere else; whether I'm accepted or not is another question. I felt that also there is this tall poppy thing too, you talk about the prizes and things and people can't wait to try and cut me down. Then people will complain about the lack of—that this culture doesn't support celebrities. So I think that there is a contradiction involved. And if there is no culture of celebrity, then you are not going to get the recognition people should get, overseas and internationally.

Well I was surprised by the reviews you got for Stepper. *It's as if you've irritated people by a cleverness that they don't like. I wonder what your reaction is to that?*

Well it's always slightly hard work reading my stuff. But it's not tedious, hopefully. You've got to read backwards and forwards and I think that sometimes people can't empathise with that; they want a straight story, but that's their problem. I've never seen writing as anything straightforward. It's always something that is hidden and diagonal and runs back upon itself most of the time.

One of the reviews for Stepper *actually seemed to me a tantrum in print, that you'd delivered characters that this particular reviewer couldn't empathise with. I wondered what your reaction might be. Do you want your reader to care, to be engaged, to be moved by these people and their fate?*

Well I think some readers are moved and especially moved by the sadness of Reiko's life; however, there's no accounting for taste. I wonder why people play the man and not the ball. But in many ways, I think that in the literary scene, despite all its sniping and everything else, there is a level playing field and the writing has to come through to prove that. I am confident about my writing.

I don't think there is a question about that, but I think it's interesting the reaction that some of your work gets. I am thinking of Drift *now and you took a writer that most people hadn't heard of, B.S. Johnson.*

Strangely enough, there is now a biography since *Drift* came out. The biography has been hurriedly written in Britain, and that book is coming out, if not out already—on the life of B.S. Johnson.

As a companion volume to the novel Drift*, we hope. I can see them together in the book shelves.*

Thank you.

I am interested though, because I was struck by the difference in the voice in Stepper*, by the writing voice of Stepper. It seemed to me that you had taken a departure in a sense, that you'd taken off. And I wondered if that had anything to do with the perception of yourself being called a difficult writer, and deciding consciously, 'I'm going to do something else'.*

I wasn't conscious of that. I think what I was doing in *Stepper* was a lot more serious than I've ever done before. I mean *Double-Wolf* and everything else were plays on things. And the end result may be just a play, or a playing. But I think, *Stepper,* I really engaged with what I thought was a form of moral seriousness and I think that a novel, in my terms anyway, should push towards a morality of style, that's what I call it—a morality of style that deals with refinement of human sensibility and it deals with perhaps revelation of human vulnerability. So I was grappling with those rather bigger themes in this book. So in a way it was a little more serious than my normal.

A little bit more serious, and also a lightness, that's what struck me. In a sense, it's probably the easiest reading if you want to talk about effortless prose that kind of moves you forward. It seems to me that you ask us to go backwards and forwards, but in a sense you can read this straight through.

Stepper of course … the word *steppen* in German is 'tap dancing', so there's a lightness, you have to watch your step, but at the same time there is a lightness, and treading lightly, I think, is very important too when you are dealing with heavy

matters. Stepper himself says that at one stage, you know when the others are jumping at their own shadows, 'It's best to dance in the light'.

Because in a sense it is this business of history and memory, very unfashionable, in a sense, to ask us to think about betrayal at the end of the twentieth century, isn't it?

That whole idea of patriotism in the global whatever, is becoming more and more problematic. Wanting that closed-in kind of environment, rather than an opening out. Politicians for instance harp on the idea of the family—that was a very big thing in Japan prior to the war, the idea that the Emperor was the head of the family and if you confessed, if you made a confession about your foreign influences (now I would be confessing all the time in that sense) if you confessed your foreign influences and said you would denounce them you would be brought back into the Japanese family and you would be forgiven and you would find your place in heaven as it were. So yes, that was one thing that I wanted to get at, that idea of patriotism and not betrayal of yourself to conform to that kind of majority approval.

And very complicated to talk about that in a context of Australian and recent political developments.

Yes

When nationalism, when a sense of country and a sense of who we are, is really a sense of bulwark against something outside.

Yes, when in fact I am the complete outsider, as it were.

And a wonderful writer to boot. Brian Castro thank you so much for joining us this morning.

Thank you Louise.

Appendix 7

Interview with Caroline Baum

***Between the Lines*, ABC-TV**
4 June 1997

Baum: *Ever since he first won the Vogel Award in 1982 Brian Castro has been delivering some of the most challenging fiction on the Australiasn scene. In fact his prose practically needs decoding, which is particularly appropriate to his new novel,* Stepper*, which is about a double agent in Japan between the wars.*

Brian, this is not your first spy novel, you had a go at the genre with Pomeroy. *What is it about the spy novel that fascinates you?*

Castro: I think because writing is spying, to a certain degree. I think being a writer is not being a talker. I think a writer is someone who is observing, who is listening and you are constantly putting these things down for a kind of manipulation of a new world that you might want to create within yourself. So I see a lot of similarities between spying and writing.

Now Stepper himself is based on a real life spy Richard Sorge. What was his story?

His story was, well, similar to *some* of the historical events that I have detailed. He was a mixture of Russian and German, he went to Japan, passed himself off as a Nazi in order to get the secrets so that he could relay them back to Stalin. So he was the consummate spy. I wasn't so much interested in recreating that historical circumstance ... I see the novel as a kind of 'backfill'—you are filling in the gaps that historians have left out, you are filling in the gaps, the lacunae, if you like, that never really occurred, but you may speculate on those things. So in many ways I was inspired, for this novel, not because I came across this story immediately ... I was very fascinated by Patrick White's *Voss* and that he had based it on Ludwig Leichhardt, but that's such a crude way of saying it, that he based it on Ludwig Leichhardt. He was exploring a kind of psychological landscape that was not a geographical one, was not a historical one.

Wasn't the character of Stepper also partly inspired by your own father?

Yes, my father was one of these characters from the Shanghai of the thirties. So he was wealthy, he was involved in a lot of kind of shady activities, but he was also involved in a kind of adventurousness. When the Japanese invaded he fought them; when the Nationals tried to get rid of the Communists he was involved in that. So in many ways he was a kind of a mercenary as well as an adventurer.

But he was also a womaniser, wasn't he? I mean it's that part of his personality that you have borrowed for Stepper isn't it?

Very much so! I think I had a character in search of a novel! He was partly my father and partly the fact that I needed to hang it on a historical figure. But, you know, one of the things about historians is that they write about society, they never write about—well, they seldom write about—individuals. So I really had this notion that I could kind of speak not just through my father but through a dead historical figure.

Tell me what it was like growing up in Hong Kong in the fifties because your circumstances were slightly unusual in that as a child you were often very ill and in fact close to death and I wondered what kind of an inner world you created for yourself and how the outer world impinged upon your life?

There were two, I think, illness and typhoons. Both were an attempt not to have to go to school. [laughs] I felt that you know by being ill you could lie back and actually absorb a lot of what was going on around you: the talk, the adult world that you weren't privileged to ... [be part of]. But you also read a lot and, you know, if I had some advice for young writers I would say don't be laid back, be laid up! [both laugh]

I had every illness under the sun. Between the ages of five and ten I had cholera, I had hepatitis, I had pneumonia on and off. I wasn't expected to live. At times.

Is that why you are so pre-occupied with death as a writer?

Ahh—I think *all* writers are preoccupied with death. I think death is a kind of force that enables you to transcend the unconscious existence. You tend to become more caring about existence. You know, as the philosopher Heidegger said, you have to be a custodian of your being. So, yes. I think in a very crude way those people who

have actually gone through dangerous situations, who have made themselves available to risk are more appreciative of living fully.

Because in Stepper the cocktail is sex and death, which in a way is a particularly romantic cocktail for someone who is really, often classified as the ultimate postmodern writer.

I think postmodernism tends to *dull* a lot of things. It tends to flatten out the difference. But I think eroticism and spying go hand in hand.

Why?

Ah!

Why is spying always sexy?

Well, you go back to the Mata Hari! I mean, she—her bedroom, you could say—was a site of information technology. [laughs] She was taking in so much about how she could manipulate very powerful men, for instance. So in those circumstances, spying and listening and using that information through eros was a much practised role.

Because what Stepper does is he penetrates both women and cultures, doesn't he? So are you saying that sex is a sort of short cut to national identity?

Sex is, ... eroticism rather, is more—how could I say—an interesting divination of the nation's soul. Being a spy makes it worse—it compounds the situation because, you know, eroticism is theatre—it's the unconscious acting out itself. And I think that is full of revelation about a human being. But being a spy and having to conceal so much ... eroticism is the ultimate confession, I think it is the ultimate revelation of the human soul. So, yeah, those two things go very much together.
You say at one point that Stepper stands at 'that blind spot between delusion and ambition'. Is that also where the writer is?

Very much so. I think ambition and private life and eroticism ... all these things can never be too far away from the writer's consciousness. I think if you truly are a writer, if that is all that matters … I hate to say this but it's a kind of extreme moment in which you will abandon everything for that.

Now the book has at times a very playful tone, and yet at the same time one critic has called it 'infuriatingly elusive' and you do use an astonishing number of very difficult words that one needs to look up in the dictionary and obscure puns. Do you enjoy making your work a game, a test, or a challenge for your readers?

I suppose I do enjoy it but I think I'm also withdrawing from the obvious … because, you know, I look around at so much contemporary writing and I fear for the fact that it is so obvious. I think writing is dissimulation, writing is trying to escape the obvious, trying to get away from something that is going to imprison you, and that is the exact point of view, that is the ideology, the issue, or whatever that tends to capture writers' imaginations. I think you are trying to escape.

READING:
'Tokyo 1994. Love again. But what is love to an old man? Desire without ... put on the pasty mask of death?'

How does it feel as a migrant writer in Australia today to have a Pauline Hanson on the scene?

I think it becomes more and more uncomfortable for me to live in this country. However, I have a great deal of hope because I feel that this is a specific kind of attitude problem that will change. I think Australia will be hauled into the twenty-first century kicking and screaming whether it likes it or not, and these things like race and identity will become quite irrelevant. My only great fear is that it goes down [either of] two tracks—which I would hate to see it go down—and that is that it becomes a kind of irrelevant backwater in terms of the region. I don't think so, however, I think that economics is the bottom line. The other way is that there will be a long or a short period of internal turmoil and I think ironically that those people who have bagged multiculturalism as divisive are now having to defend I think the more terrible divisiveness caused by that spurious linkage between authenticity and purity and grace, and it is very much a nineteenth century idea!

On that subject then, given your concerns but also your playful tone in your own work, how do you feel about the recent multicultural literary hoaxes?

Well, you know, as a writer I sympathise because you are always playing different roles. Now I'm playing a role here—this is a theatrical event, there's a camera

there—so in many ways 99% of your life, in your job, whatever, you are playing an inauthentic role. But I think that writers tend to carry it over a lot more. You tend to create characters that you are trying to live at that moment and you practise these things. You know, I go around practising characters—God help the people who are in reception of this, because they probably think I'm cracked. But again it's for that purpose as I was saying before, that ultimate purpose of writing. There is nothing else ... So you are actually pushing all this into that [writing].

So you are excusing these hoaxers?

I'm not excusing them. I think if you are using them for money that's a different matter, that's not part of my agenda. If you unintentionally cross the line because you are actually doing some kind of internal research, that's fine. But ultimately I think we have an obsession about authenticity. You see this is one of the things that I have to come across all the time. Coming from a confluence of cultures—Portuguese, English Chinese, Jewish, to an extent—you are never treated as someone who is authentic because you are not pure. So you know that linkage, that notion, is a terribly vexing one, and I think that coming from that hybridity you constantly have to go into other narratives. That's why a lot of my writing is non-linear. That is why a lot of my writing is almost in a different realm. It doesn't set itself within a place, and it comes back to that idea that for the true creative artist there is only risk. Nothing else.

Brian Castro's Stepper *is published by Random House.*

Appendix 8

Interview with Michael Deves

29 November 1997 in Melbourne.
Brian Castro, Maryanne Dever, Michael Deves

MD I originally chose [to write a thesis about] you because I like what I loosely call a 'poetic' style of writing, where the writer is more interested in the effects that he generates than trying to tell a story that comes to some 'conclusion'.

BC I suppose the two things are that you've got to define what 'poetic' is and also not to confuse that with 'poetics' as such. You know that there is a poetics of Postmodernism, a poetics of metafiction, where the idea comes very much to the fore, the idea of writing. But that's very different from the idea of poetic style in the ordinary sense, and I think I'd rather go for the latter, in the sense that I do feel that it's very important in terms of style to bring back the subject, the poetic subject as it were. It's the passionate intensity of the words that make my writing … I'm surprised that you actually talk about DeLillo because I have read the latest DeLillo, *Underworld,* and I don't feel any rapport with it at all in the sense that I think he's flattening his style to the point at which there is no return.

MD: I haven't read it yet so I'm waiting to read that. I found *Mao II* had 'gone off'.

BC: Yes, gone off already … whereas *White Noise* is very up there …

MD: *White Noise* is the one that I think is poetic …

BC: Exactly. I agree.

MD: … and *Libra* is slightly different … but *White Noise* is still one of my favourites …

BC: *White Noise* is still identifiable with that subject, that human voice, whereas now I think DeLillo's actually gone into this almost mythopoeic style, or

non-style, that simply says that this is the way the world is; it has no voice, no subject, no particular passion and thrust, no metaphor … That's what it's getting to; there is no metaphor, there is only myth.

MaD: That's much more cinematic, it's more like *Pulp Fiction*. There isn't that control of subject, there is that randomness, that lack of connection. And the only connections you have are …

BC: Are connections themselves.

MaD: Quite, quite.

BC: I think that's what people are trying to put upon me. There were several views about *Stepper*—or at least the whole of my work—… Evelyn Juers in *The Australian's Review of Books* was more or less saying that it is only the connections that are important.

MaD: But I think that's a different kind of connection, kind of like the connections you've got in *Pulp Fiction* …

BC: When in fact I'm not really trying to reach for that, you see—that is the antithesis of what I'm trying to do.

MD: That's probably the antithesis of the way I read novels. I always read very subjectively—what are the *people* doing? what are the *people* thinking? how am I reacting to it? I don't want to read just connections—you go and read history books for that, I think.

BC: Exactly.

MD: I didn't like *Pulp Fiction* when it came out because I thought it was irresponsible—it was high-class nonsense. A lot of kids watching it are going to think it's fun to do drugs.

BC: Well, yes, it's playing with the idea of the idea, and that in a way is a short cut to nothing; it comes to a dead-end. I think that's what so much Postmodern writing seems to me to be about.

MaD: In *Pulp Fiction* there are also levels of irony and referencing, self-referencing, which if you actually aren't able to access the other texts to which it is referring …

MD: Yes, that is, I think, the theme … that you do need to know everything else, you need to know what they're parodying in the first place. If you don't then that comes across as dangerously irresponsible …

BC: That's a very closed world. If it's going to make connections it doesn't make them in a wider sense, and I'm always out for this larger, bigger world of significance. In other words you just don't point to a very specific thing like 'Here I am. Look at me writing. Look at me making ideas'. I don't like that at all. And that's where people get me wrong. So many reviewers have said 'This writing is so Postmodern …' I'm *not* Postmodern. I think I might have said to you over the email I really consider myself … as a very high Modernist, at least a late Modernist.

MaD: But 'Postmodern' in many reviews is really used very loosely, as a synonym for 'difficult'.

BC: Yes. 'Difficult'? Or is it like 'commodity'. I think Postmodernism—the word itself—is often used for the word 'commodity'. In other words you should be able to pick this up in the train, read it, and then make all these connections in your head, you know, particularly if you're a little bit 'high', and simply say 'There are a whole bunch of ideas out there. Now I don't know whether I can follow these ideas all the way through, whether they have substance or whatever, but just because they're ideas it's fashionable, it's nice, it's pleasurable.' And I think it is like a hit of something which is not very deep. In fact you say to yourself, 'Gosh, isn't this wonderful. I'm intellectual, all of a sudden.'

MD: Well Postmodernism is becoming a very awkward term. I realise that what I mean by it and what I thought I was understanding by it when I was learning about it a couple of years ago as an undergraduate is not what it is being used as now. I thought it was a gradual shift from 19th century realism into the Modernism of early 20th century, and when *that* started to run a bit flat and writers felt they had worked through that they went onto the next thing. It is not a whole set of agreed, theoretical ideas about how you go about writing,

or how literature 'works'. It is really just a broad movement. You know, what are people doing now that they weren't doing in the 20s and 30s? They're writing in a different way.

BC: I think Postmodernism is actually for theorists and for readers. It's for academics. It's not really a term one should use for writers, literary fictive writers. I feel that it is basically a re-evaluation of the position of the academic. All of a sudden academics are writing all this stuff. Writers are no longer writing this because basically the subject is devalued, the experience is devalued. There is writer, the writer is dead. So therefore academics who write this stuff are taking over the ground, re-appropriating the ground. It think it has its very substantial point of view, and that is that it comes from a basic understanding of Greek philosophy, and I think in many ways that when you look at Derrida and Barthes, etc. you are looking at a re-evaluation, a re-reading of Plato and Aristotle. Which is legitimate, from an academic point of view, but not from a writer's point of view. And I think that what Roland Barthes did—and he was the only one that I can see who can actually *write*— but he is the one who has not taken the idea into the realm of the institution. He is the one who has said 'Look, there is a personal life here', 'There is a personal photograph of myself', 'There is the time when I speak about my tuberculosis', 'Here is the period that I am drawing out of the rib that was taken out of my side', and the whole Christian-Judaic myth which I find so enveloping and so interesting. But the rest of them have simply, I think, gone off the track. The rest of them have gone into their jargon.

MaD: But Barthes is not a Postmodernist.

BC: He's not a Postmodernist, no. Well, he's the beginning, put it that way. Post-structuralism, Structuralism, Postmodernism. Who was the one who drew the distinction between Modernists and Post-Structuralists? Baudrillard wasn't it? Anyway, the whole French school I think had been riding on this wave, and Derrida certainly can't write! [Laughs]. I would like to place that on record! The guy can't write! There are many others who can. I certainly enjoy reading Foucault, but then Foucault doesn't pretend to be a writer. He calls himself an archaeologist, which is *very* interesting. But Derrida certainly wants to be a writer. I think I see that wish all the time, that wish to be a writer—my personal life, and how can I depersonalise my personal life. It doesn't seem relevant to me. Because these people don't actually … I mean

put it this way. In the old days—and here I am showing my age!—in the old days people like Malcolm Lowry or William Faulkner, or whoever, they *lived* a certain proportion of their writing, put it that way. Nowadays there is no lived proportion, there is only an academic's room, or office, or library. And they broadcast their views from that position. That's why so many academic writers—I won't name names here!—who try to make it into the fiction world … I find them laughable. I find their style terribly boring.

MaD: But they're writing in anticipation of their own criticism.

BC: Exactly. And this whole idea of posterity, that some day they will be seen as great writers rather than academics—which in fact is what they should be doing, simply pursuing their careers as academics, becoming great professors, expounding theories.

MD: Well I'm afraid I'm still stuck with the idea of novels as being moral fiction, being something to talk to other people about; the way you see the world, and try to understand the world. Not how you might explain a theory or write something that fits a theory.

BC: I agree to a certain extent, but I come to the point at which there is … how should I say … there used to be a barrier which a reader had to transgress in order to turn the picture around so that it isn't just a moral view. But I think that that point in history has been passed, or surpassed, in the sense that I now feel that I'm actually retreating, back to the moral stance. I don't want to use the word 'moral' because I don't think it's a very useful one …

MD: No I am using that loosely, I don't mean morals in moral/immoral, I mean as having some purpose or connectivity with 'humanism', with talking to other people.

BC: Yes. When in fact that's *wholly* been devalued. That's why I'm going back to it. Because every time something is devalued [laughs] I want to bring it back! And I think that's an important point in the sense that people are now saying that they are writing 'post-disciplinary' writing—texts that don't have any moral point of view, don't have any particular position. Yet I feel that I'm linked in and that's why Walter Benjamin is so important to me. I don't write anything without a reference to him now, because I think that I'm

linked in to that idea that there is a—for want of a better word—'socialist theory' behind one's commitment to things, and it's not just 'the word' out there, not really representing, not being a referent, not being a symbolic reference to something else. There is an element of commitment in terms of words. In other words, words are commitments, words are actions, to a degree. That is where I come back down, you see, and that is where I say to myself this whole new generation of writers who have no commitment, not even in a very minor way, leaves me cold, leaves me entirely cold. I don't subscribe to that.

I think you have to have a personal stake somewhere along the way. If you put yourself to words, you can't simply be ironic all your life, you can't simply play games with ideas and words, and, I think that's where I'm heading, back to the position in which I find that socialist ideals have significance.

MD: I still see a 'biography' behind all your novels. And I don't know how you could write without reference to that, and you say that you are moving back towards that, and that that's what your next project is more involved with …

MaD: What do you mean by a biography?

MD: A person …

BC: Benjamin, Freud, B.S. Johnson …

MaD: That's not what you mean, is it?

MD: Not just that, no. I also mean Brian Castro behind …

BC: Oh yes, a person, a subject.

MD: A person who is thinking these thoughts and not just thinking them *in vacuo*, but thinking them in terms of their own life, *your* own life. I mean there is enough autobiography in some of the books, and then others of the books are written 'against' other biographies or texts. *Double-Wolf* is a Freudian thing, *Drift* is the B.S. Johnson; but certainly something like

Pomeroy is a 'Brian Castro' thing, and *After China.* So I still see a person behind that.

BC: There is a difference between the fictive person and the person, of course, but I see what you're getting at, the idea that there is a fictive subject, and the fictive subject is the one you actually empathise with, you stand behind in a sense. There is a fictive subject. One would rather call it that, I think, rather than an 'autobiography'. I mean autobiography has thousands of meanings. I think the fictive subject has been invested with a lot of the characteristics of the real subject. That's why I would rather read an author like Hemingway who has a tremendous amount of fictive subject there—huge, legendary. Hemingway, the figure. But also a large part of the substance that went into that was real experience. And I think that I fall back on that to a certain extent. If I'm not sitting in an academic office pretending and writing about writing—I think that's where I draw the line, because I'm not actually a subject in that sense, a subject who doesn't have a subject. You know, like David Brooks says: the 'subject text'. [laughs] I mean it's so ludicrous—'the subject text'! You know, as though there's nobody actually holding the pen there, or actually typing the keys.

I think I stand between someone like John Gardner whom I think you might …

MD: That's perhaps going a little too far in one direction …

BC: Or John Fowles.

MD: Yes Fowles … people I see as trying to work something out, in a sense trying to push a view … It's not necessarily their own person that they're putting into it, but it's part of their own person, part of their imaginative persona. But what they are trying to do is work out questions. Ask questions. Test things out. Try things. Even going back to Dostoyevsky, someone like that.

MaD: I was thinking more about Thomas Mann, with the notion of life-work. That it's all part of an exercise in trying to explore some of these ideas. You see that in for example David Malouf's work, end-to-end—it's the same novel. Endlessly trying to go round this one issue. Coming out of the closet?

BC: It's not coming out of the closet so much as the issue of a Grecian mentor model and the boy who learns from the mentor.

MaD: Or to put it another way it's an attempt to draw out some of the complexities, some of the ambiguities, contradictions in relationships between men in this culture, however you might wish to project that onto other cultures at other times.

BC: He certainly never takes an ideological point of view. That's one thing with David Malouf. He's almost epideictic in the sense that he wants to teach you about this notion that he's got that he presumes no-one has explored. Perhaps he's right, too. No-one since Patrick White has explored it.

I'm not saying it's the same framework, I'm saying Patrick White would probably explore the whole idea from a woman character's point of view. He did the cross-dressing type of thing, David Malouf is doing the child/man thing.

MD: You talk a lot about not wanting to fit into any particular category, any particular genre.

BC: I think in all my works—and I haven't really thought about this so I haven't been able to say it in the past—I think six novels down the track I am more or less now saying 'Gosh I should have a look at what I've been up to'. And I suddenly realise that from my point of view, at least, all I've been doing has been working around the one idea, and that is that I've constantly been hearkening to the transitoriness of life. I mean it's a very simple idea really, that we are the only creatures on earth that know that we are going to die. That is a reminder that the novel itself is a *memento mori*, and I think every single one of my novels deals with this fact, every single novel deals with how ironic our ideas of ourself are and also how quick death is, how inevitable it is. I think that that's why my next work is so much involved with Walter Benjamin, because he was one person who said—and it agrees with me so much—he said he was a melancholic. That was the first thing. Immediately I snapped onto that. *I'm* a melancholic. He said he was very slow, he was never quick to pick up people's ideas. He was very slow because he had to work through them. His mother must have been very intelligent; she used to point things out to him all the time and draw connections and

ideas, and he would be lagging behind her. Even in the city when they used to walk he would walk three or four steps behind because he had to take these things in. And as he worked through them he suddenly realised that the whole process was a slowness. And Milan Kundera's last book was called *Slowness*. It's a very interesting idea that all of these people are on. And that is that progression towards death is constantly there and that's why Benjamin is so interested in the idea of allegory. You know the medieval allegories where there are skeletons with a scythe and other emblems. That notion intrigues me in the sense that Benjamin says that this is the antidote to myth; myths of nations, myths of Fascism. The reason Germany became this huge nationalistic state was because people were constantly celebrating without the idea of death … without the idea that death is hopeless and despairing. If only [people] read Kafka! They would not go on this Fascist line. I really feel a connection with that. I feel in a very broad sense that connection, that this idea of flouting the idea of death is a short cut to disaster, and there is no resurrection, no redemption from that disaster. In a way I am very pessimistic, but I rejoice in that aesthetics of pessimism.

MD: Somewhere along the line you have said that your themes are Freud's themes, sex and death, and that really that's all there is—everything revolves around that, and in a sense they are the same thing. Sex is the antidote to death or the way we avoid death.

BC: Sex is the only momentary thing that, until it's over it, doesn't have a time. That's why *After China* was basically all about that. And the Chinese of course believe that the sexual act is the moment at which time is erased.

MD: Are they all original stories you have used in *After China?*

BC: No. Absolutely all fictional. I think there's one that is original and that is the last one, the one about the Empress who used to have male lovers and then she'd kill them. But all the rest, no. I took examples of beginnings of stories and then worked my own story into it, and I think that was the exciting part about writing *After China.* There were all these stories, which I wasn't simply going to repeat or change or twist. I liked the beginnings, and the beginnings of all these Chinese stories were wonderful: they never never ever fulfilled their promise, though. In other words a lot of these ancient Chinese stories

began with *so* many connections that you could have made, but they always went down the path that was not very interesting.

MD: That's something that is difficult, to work out when you are making things up and when you are not. For example with B.S. Johnson there are some very strong ties to what the real person did, and there are other things … Like at one stage you quoted a *London Review of Books* review of Johnson and the *London Review of Books* wasn't running at the time …

BC: No.

MD: And suddenly I think 'Have I got something wrong here or not?', and I have to be a bit careful.

BC: Well *Double-Wolf* was the same; the bibliography at the back is a whole lot of fictional material mixed in with real material. I guess in a way I am playing with the idea of searching for what is real and what isn't in a novel, and I have always specifically stated this, that I'm not writing fact. Fact is not something I deal with. But I'm using a lot of the equipment … I'm not saying to the reader 'Please respect this because it's validated'. That has never been my intention. And I think some people get me wrong in that respect. In the past I've been attacked for that and people say 'Oh gosh, historically this is incorrect …'

MaD: You get those funny little letters.

BC: Yes, letters … 'My great grandfather was a ship captain transporting Chinese to Australia in the 1850s—there was never a ship called this …' and so on. Somebody looked up *Birds of Passage* and said 'This "wreck" wasn't a wreck' and I used to say 'I took the name of that ship because the name appealed to me …'

MD: That's right.

BC: David Martin, a very famous Australian writer, … said—he didn't mention my name, but said—'There was no massacre at Robe. There definitely wasn't a massacre at Robe'. And historically he's correct—there wasn't a massacre—people did get their pigtails chopped off and bashed up, but there wasn't a

'massacre'. I wasn't trying to suggest suddenly there was this massacre and no-one knew about it. Like people writing about Aboriginal history for instance. That wasn't the intention. The fact was that I was generating a narrative and the *narrative* was the thing that I went along with. I'm not doing it in a Demidenko sense, to rewrite history, or to 'wrong' history in any kind
of sense, what I'm really saying is that you've got to read further than the narrative and I think that *Birds of Passage* does fulfil that requirement. You are reading it as literature; you are not reading it as history. I think that people who read it as history are very, very literal-minded, and that's their prerogative if they want to do it that way.

MD: It's a bit like writers saying that once they start writing the characters take over and dictate.

BC: Well take Joyce's *Ulysses*—if you read Joyce's *Ulysses* as a Dubliner and say 'Look he went down the wrong road there' or 'he turned left there and that pub wasn't called that' It's like 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' You would be going right down the wrong path. I have always in my fiction not used particular historical fact as a validation, but simply as a stepping stone to the next narratological line. People say you travesty history or are mis-using your data, or whatever. I'm writing *fiction* and I think that if I claimed to be a historian that would be very different. These 'historical fictions', I can't stand them because they're so boring, and do you know why?—because the facts actually constrain them. They can't actually get away from them. They become *so* boring! These English women who write historical fiction about Elizabeth I, Walter Raleigh ….

MaD: You talk about the question of doing research, and then when to stop doing research, with the idea that you can do too much …

BC: You do too much, yes.

MaD: … and then it does take over.

BC: You become totally restrained by the fact that you say to yourself 'I can't possibly do this here because the facts say such-and-such'. I think the less you know about some things the better … I don't think that I'm actually

pushing a wheelbarrow—if I were and I were using historical names then I'd be at fault. But I'm not. What I'm saying is that I've always believed that you have got to look on a piece of writing as a kind of hologram. There are angles that you look at that you see as you have never seen before. And suddenly when you see those angles you are somehow liberated—hopefully anyway—liberated from the one point of view. As D.M. Thomas used to say—'the train station approach to literature'—in other words you've got to go down to Station A and then you stop at B & C, etc. He said 'Well what about the fact that you could have gone to one station, never left it, and *imagined* Z'. It's the notion that fiction can do anything, apart from the expected. So that's one motivation for writing fiction, I think: the liberation of oneself from the way you were trained. In a way it's paradoxical I suppose, *para*, you know, 'against', the *doxa*.

MD: You are not writing short stories?

BC: No. I realised that all my short stories were episodes of fiction in a larger work. I think if you scrounge up my short stories you'll probably realise that they are not the traditional short story, they don't have that self-containedness. They always have a larger reference.

MD: Yes, a lot of them look like exercises—you are trying something out. A lot of them you can see have been re-worked, so for example 'The Cave' has come back in *Birds of Passage* in a different way.

BC: They always look like extracts from a novel and I think that's the way I also see short stories. They are a preparation for a larger work, they are glimpses of a larger work—even though the larger work may never be written, and may not exist. That's why I like short stories that are not well-rounded or don't have a point at the end.

MaD: [with irony] But they are *meant* to …

BC: But they are *meant* to, I know! [laughs] And unfortunately that's another form that really restricts … I find short stories even more restrictive than a 300 page novel, in the sense that there are certain expectations, you know, that at the end … especially the last line … [laughs]

MD: A couple of yours I think don't *have* last lines! One of them, I finished and I came to the bottom of a page and I thought 'Oh shit, I haven't copied the last page! I'll have to go back and find it again!' I went back to the library, dragged it out, and I had: I'd photocopied the last page, it's just that it didn't 'end'.

BC: [laughing] That's it! But from my point of view any piece of writing is taking you to a particular world and it doesn't have to take 300 pages to do so. I mean it can take five pages as a short story may do. It's taking you into a glimpse of that world … then that's it, you leave it. I think that's why it comes back to this—and it's very interesting that you're doing your thesis on this because not many people (well none!) have commented on this particular point—and that is that it's the style that does this. It's the style I'm interested in that brings you straight into a situation. And so many people can't do that. So many writers want you to spend 300 pages before you even *get* some idea of where this world is. I am a minimalist—put it that way. Within the sentence itself I want to bring you there. I want to bring you, within that sentence, to not only just a place but a framework of mind. So you are entering somebody's mind.

MD: There is almost no scene-setting. In your writing you jump straight in, then there's nothing to connect to the next passage if there is a break.

BC: It is almost uncanny—that's why I come back to Freud here—that uncanny feeling of having visited a place before. But somehow it's not connected, somehow it's not really there. You can't place it. But it's a place almost in a dream. And that's what I am trying to achieve. Now I can't speak for readers because I don't enter their minds, but in my *projection* of the writer's mind … put it that way, it's the basis I work upon, I'm never just coming from the point of view of Brian Castro's mind. I am always thinking 'I am putting down these words as a projection of a writer's mind'—that's how it works, I think.

MD: I have got the impression from reading other reviews, and perhaps my own reactions too, that people either go along with you, or if they buck, they're out. They are going to miss the point badly.

BC: Yes

MaD: You presume a very active reader.

BC: Yes I presume a tremendously active reader.

MaD: You don't make connections *for* the reader, the reader has to make those connections and the reader has to take quite a lot on trust for quite a long time. In many fictions they have to put up with not really knowing what they've just read. They trust that it will become apparent later on.

MD: It sometimes doesn't too. And that's a little paradox I'm still trying to work through. The first time I read *After China* I didn't make a lot of sense out of it. The second time I started to read I was about half way through thinking 'I'm still not following lots of this' and then suddenly I came to the clues that make you go back and which explain things. And I thought 'I'd read over that the first time, totally!', and that's because I'm not a good first time reader.

BC: Yes. And even back again, because when you work at *After China* you realise that the main character's hotel is built in the form of a ship, and when you go back again you realise that *Birds of Passage* is about dislocation, migration, coming to China in a ship and foundering at Robe. Which basically is the kind of place I presumed was the setting for *After China*; that the hotel was on a beach overlooking the coast, etc. And the ship which he built into a kind of self-destructive impulse … there's a cock that he can open and which floods the ship, scuttles the ship. So it's a case of reading back, that notion that you can't really settle in a place in that very old-fashioned sense of identity and location, but you are there in a rather alien sense that is going to be totally self-destructive in the end—it's going to destroy what you create. When I finished writing *After China* I felt that that's where I was going, that the book itself wasn't going to be understood. That what you create will sink. What I was creating was going to sink into the ocean, never to be seen again. And I think that's the feeling I got with my writing at that stage. I feel a little differently now. I don't know why. Maybe six novels down the track you feel that you've established something. But I really did feel that after *After China* the big break was coming somehow. Maybe it was in my own personal life, that it was going to be the end of my first marriage, or something. But it wasn't going to be understood—it was going to be an act

of self-destruction that nobody could understand. But if you read *After China* very carefully in line with some of the other works, particularly *Birds of Passage*, you realise that there is a direct connection, that those stories that are told [in *After China*] are very similar to the stories that were being invented in *Birds of Passage*—which everyone said 'Oh, obviously autobiographical'. [laughs] I felt the whole idea that in *After China* is that cancer, which is basically a termination and has a chronology— 'this person who has cancer will die within a certain time'—and every time you tell a story, like Scheherazade you would put aside time. Now that—mixed with the Chinese notion of sex which is the idea that time is erased—is a very potent one, I think, in relation to death. So sex and death, Freud, all come into it. All those connections are there in a very potent way, and I think *After China*, being my shortest book, is the most compressed.

MD: But that's the one that relies on storytelling as such, and the story that's built [around it] is almost not there. We know almost nothing about the woman writer; we don't know much about the architect either. And perhaps if we did the stories might lose a bit of freshness …

BC: They would.

MD: As it is you can keep coming back—you can go through the stories in any order, pick the novel up anywhere, and get different things out of it each time.

BC: Yes. *After China* was probably the least understood of my books amongst reviewers and critics.

MaD: I think it's also the one that was most liked.

BC: It was the most liked in that people didn't know why they liked it. You know, it was very strange—several people said that to me, you know, when I won the Victorian Premier's [Award] for it. They didn't know *why* they liked it.

MD: At one stage I was writing something along the lines that your books don't have closure. *Birds of Passage* is about the only novel that seems to have

some sort of closure. Then another time I thought 'Ah, but *After China* does, in fact it's got the best closure', and at other times I think, no, it doesn't.

MaD: It does have closure—but closure on what?

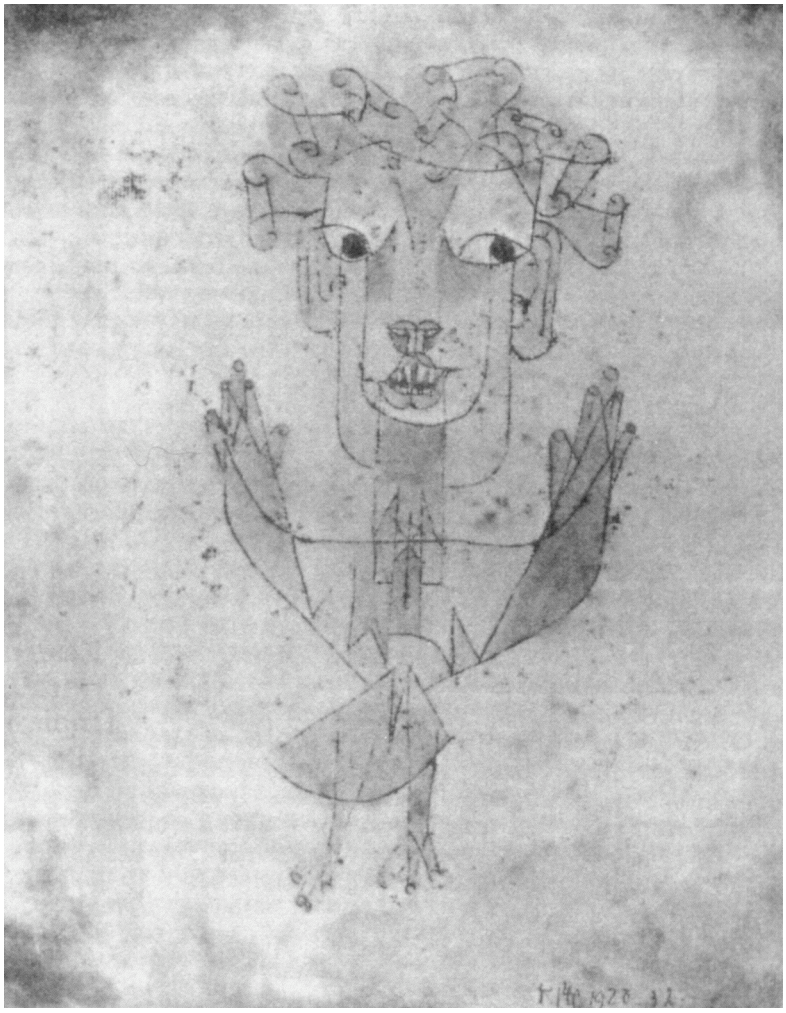
BC: There are so many things that come into it, I think. There was a little postscript about Japanese architecture and renewal, which is really a kind of a side-track—it does side-track people, and they try to latch onto it, but I don't think it's very important at all.

MD: I once said to you 'I think your books are very positive', or something similar, and I think that's what I do with *After China*. I see that as a positive closure. OK the woman dies, but the architect falls apart and then says 'OK, it's time to start off again', and he finds the energy to start again.

BC: Yes it's that renewal.

MD: And then the architecture metaphor [from the postscript] fits in: people saying well let's have buildings that do destruct and renew. And that all fits together. So in that sense there's a closure of positiveness.

BC: Yes, when you look at all the other novels … *Birds of Passage,* perhaps, you could say … well, not really, it's not really positive. *Pomeroy*, definitely, has a very negative ending. That's Walter Benjamin again, at the end, where Pomeroy is skiing down a slope and then he sees the ruins of history in front of him and he's flying back ... that was Benjamin's notion of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* [see over page], a painting of an angel confronting history, but history itself is a ruin and is being blown back by the winds of change, and the angel is flying backwards, looking at the ruins of history! That's *one* idea of progress! … in the Western world, and it's so ironic. I feel that's what's happening in *Pomeroy*.



Angelus Novus

by Paul Klee

In *Double Wolf*, Artie Catacomb basically goes in a catacomb, a cave, at the end—'The Cave' short story, which is very important here in the sense that he's self-destructing, he's lighting fires in this cave and watching his shadows: you know, Plato's idea of seeing your shadows in front of the fire in the cave. In other words we can't possibly know any more about ourselves—a very negative view. *After China* is the totally different novel about renewal and architecture and building—the first time man-made objects come into [my novels] because all the rest were nature; this is the first time man-made objects come into my renewal idea.

Drift—very negative. He's flying off and he's sticking up two fingers and saying, 'Fuck you, bastards'. Very negative. [laughing]. And *Stepper*. Execution, death, betrayal. So you're right. *After China* has the only man-made [thing] that is being renewed all the time—bricks are being put up again. So, that's interesting.

MD: I have just found another, recent review of *Stepper* in which someone takes you to task for basically *not* getting the story of Sorge. You've 'changed some details' … 'so-and-so wouldn't have done this …'

BC: Pathetic, isn't it!

MD: It's amazing. The first two-thirds of the review is telling the reader about a *different* spy ring and the points of co-incidence with *your* spy ring—and you think 'Well, hang on, what's the point anyway?', because you [Castro] haven't said you are regenerating history.

BC: Exactly.

MD: This isn't a novel about politics, it's a novel about love and …

BC: Betrayal.

MD: … betrayal.

MaD: That's such a peculiar notion, a one-dimensional notion of spies. You know, the Soviet Union and 'Today I go to work and I will be a good spy and life has no other facets.'

BC: The interesting part of the whole thing about *Stepper* is of course—and all these people have missed it—was the fact that George Steiner, who wrote about Heidegger in a little book—it's one of those Fontana 'Modern Masters' series—and he tells it very lucidly where he talks about Heidegger talking about 'the care of being' and he said that we can only understand our notion of being when we take care of it, in other words, we are conscious of it. And in our day-to-day affairs, our day-to-day lives, we are so busy we don't even notice our being. And he says when you step back a little bit—this whole Existentialist thing—when you step back a bit and take care—have some consciousness of your being, it's quite an uncanny notion: 'I'm alive. Why am I here? I'm alive.' You know. This notion for which Heidegger used the German word '*Sorge*'—I mean, that's the spy's name! And this whole play on the idea of the word *Sorge* meaning 'care, of your being' and a spy who has to completely and utterly travesty that word by taking on different identities … which is basically the idea of a writer, I think, this society, this time, and that it is that you are always impersonating, dissimulating, hiding, concealing, waiting for your reader to find out about you … *That* is the notion about being a writer as far as I am concerned. People find the references that you have consciously or unconsciously embedded, and they are *making* those connections, they are *making* those discoveries. That is the notion of a spy. This is where the whole world of *Stepper* comes from, not, you know from the historical one, [which] of *course* I used—as I would have used B.S. Johnson; as I would have used Freud—to draw in these connections. So yeah, a lot of these reviews as I said in my outrage in *ABR* [No. 196, November 1997, p. 35] over this … about critics—they come to the book without knowledgeability and they write this review from their own point of view, always from their own opinion.

MD: Just going back to clues, that's another thing I have trouble with. I'm still in problem-solving mode when I read books. I keep thinking you've got to find all the allusions and then track them back. Which is, of course, impossible, especially with writing of your complexity. You are never going to track them all down, and they're not all that deliberate. They are somehow over-determined; there is more than anyone could possible work out.

BC: And they're not important either. I think …

MD: That's the thing I can't get used to.

BC: I think when you look at, for instance, people who pick on Roland Barthes in *Birds of Passage* and say 'Look I've really got to track this reference' —there isn't a great deal to track down there—the death of the author. I've previewed the death of the author and he does get killed by a laundry van. How do you go beyond that in some kind of literary significance way. No it doesn't. Well, then people say 'Why put it in there?'. Well, why write a novel? When you come to that you are really saying … I'm not really saying 'Look, I've invented some kind of chess game here for readers to find out. What I'm really saying is casting a kind of resonance and that resonance is the kind of thing people have to pick up on. In other words 'What I [Castro?] am doing here?', 'Why this particular thing?' Well the reason only goes as far as resonance. In other words I am echoing something and that something is, again, to bring you into that uncanniness, that uncanniness of a different world. And it doesn't have to have specific references. Like the *Sorge* thing in *Stepper*. I mean, few people would have discovered that, and few people would have noted that. The whole idea that there is a very significant passage in *Stepper* which says that Victor Stepper didn't care about his being; it's just a throwaway line by Ishigo. And Ishigo says well he didn't really care about being, and by not caring about being he couldn't bring himself to love. *That* is the key! If you want to generalise from that, you don't generalise from the real historical character, you go from the fact that what point is being made here is that you can't possibly understand the experience of love if you don't have some care of yourself about your notion of existence. So you are playing constantly, you are being disingenuous. So, if it were David Malouf they would immediately have picked that point up. Whereas because it's Brian Castro they think that somehow there must be some historical incident here, or fact.

MD: Another thing is the problem with puns. Occasionally people go on about the puns getting lugubrious or something—which is fine, they are sometimes—it seems as if they're compulsive at times, and in a sense I suppose they are.

BC: The pun is only a verbal manifestation of that medieval emblem of the allegory, and I don't think anyone has to draw a very long bow to make the connection there that what medievalists did was to carve on the tomb the

actual pun of death as a skeleton with a scythe, or the irony of the king, for instance, being pushed into the fires of hell by the devil, with a pitchfork up his bum! I mean, that is a pun, a visual pun basically, and that's what I am doing with my lugubrious puns—it's exactly the same only I'm using words. So the metaphorical impact is the same—I am compressing a whole lot of things into that image.

MaD: Aren't you free to read puns or not?

BC: You can. It's not specific.

MD: These are also comments on language because you often undermine a sentence with two or three puns on it, especially going back to something like *Pomeroy* where you do that to a large extent. Which is one way of saying to people 'You have just read this. Now I am going to tip it upside down and make a joke of it, and now I am going to make a joke out of that joke. *Now* what do you make of it?'

BC: There is that idea of playing, but I don't know that that was my intention. I mean what the text is and what the intention was are two totally different things. But with *Pomeroy* I guess again it was that notion [playing] is on the surface what it appears to be. The whole is simply to get the idea that there is doubleness all the way through, *Double Wolf*, double-everything, and I am not actually propounding a thesis in a novel. That's where some novelists go wrong as far as I am concerned. I read them and I see that they're really trying to say something, some idea at the end of it. I don't think a novel has that purpose. I think the novel has a purpose of simply unlatching, unlocking something, a door into infinite chaos perhaps … and it doesn't have a thesis. This is what I've always been proposing, that if a novel has a thesis then write the thesis, don't write the novel. I think a novel is my vehicle, anyway into as I said, possibly an impossible and fey world, a world that can never be quite delineated. It's a world of dream, it's a world of … I don't know, I think, it's a world that you enter and may not want to enter again. But it's an experience, that's all. It doesn't have a particular moulded and well-formed theoretical idea because if that were the case it would simply say it. And I think that where novelists go wrong is some of them work from this very forebrain idea that there is a logical end to everything and that they have to reach this logical end by somehow demonstrating it through the

novel and their characters, etc. Because when you look at Joyce … I mean, what is the thesis behind *Ulysses?* There isn't one. What there is is a tremendous hermetic quality of a very ancient Greek tale. And what are Greek tales? They are story tellings. They don't simply have a thesis.

MD: But having a thesis and having certainty, I mean, perhaps is something to do with the way you see life yourself. Some people feel confident about life—they think they know where they're going, and they probably have careers and professions and become famous doctors or lawyers certain about what they do and where they're going. Other people don't see life quite that way.

BC: Well, the uncertainly of life is the fact that you put yourself at risk. I think writers probably do that more so than many other people. That's why I distrust academic writers because they have a profession already. The beauty of writers is that they are putting themselves at risk for no apparent reason, for no good reason. They could quite easily settle down to another job. But the reason why they do this is to experience, I think, that whole notion of risk and that whole notion of the fact that even in the writing itself, the text itself, is a risk. And I don't really see the end of that—it's a kind of fatuous non-existent, non-productive way of creation. Now I think that's what creativity in the end is all about. Creativity is not a means towards an end. Creativity is an expression of some notion of hopelessness. And it doesn't help anyone. You know, nobody reading my novels will ever feel [laughs] re-birthed … it's certainly not like the Bible. So there's not much production there in that sense. But I think what you are experiencing is a language. You might want in a very simplistic sense to say that it is English but I think you are experiencing something other than that. I think basically to read a novel, that is a novel that I would want to read—it's a novel that you suddenly forget that this is English, you suddenly forget that this is any kind of specific language. You are in the language of a kind of mental state and that seems to me to come down to one thing. That is that unless you have a rather rebellious personality you don't appreciate that. So if you are a conformist, you don't appreciate my novels, I think. My novels are a kind of exhortation, a lecturing towards rebellion, by saying, 'Look, I dare you to enter this person's mind, this character's mind—it's chaotic, it's frightening, it's horrible perhaps. Or it could be really redemptive, it would be enlightening. Whatever the case is, you are going to go through an experience.' I have read relatively few writers who can do this. I might have already mentioned to

you some of my favourite writers. There is a voice, and that voice is a kind of mental, lunatic voice. Thomas Bernhard, who does this specifically, he rails against Austria. Why I find him so interesting is because Austria is so closed in, so paranoid, so … basically a society that is not liberated. And he rails against this and he is the hero figure—I mean his voice is the hero figure—and they wanted to heap honours upon him, you see, when Bernhard got international recognition. He refused these honours of these bourgeois, these mayors who wanted to say 'Here's the prize! Please take it.' And he was able to do that for two reasons: one of them that he was relatively wealthy. He inherited quite a large fortune and his family was related to the Wittgensteins and they were the aristocrats of Austria Jewry and he had this beautiful house in the Black Forest, or whatever, I can't remember where in Austria—you know Salzburg or somewhere—he was able to say 'Keep your prize. I don't need your money. But let me tell you, you've elected Kurt Waldheim as the President, a guy who was in with the Nazis!', and he's able to rail against this, and he's a voice, and it hasn't got a political intent, but his voice is so mesmerising, so lunatic, and so crazy, and so infused with—how would I say?— someone from the lunatic asylum, that I venture into it with trepidation, but with great pleasure, that here is someone who is liberating me from my ordinary, bourgeois middle-class concerns, someone who can say to his society 'Piss off! I don't need you'. That to me is liberation. That to me is … when he talks about his own family which is a cloying, horrible middle-class family and the upper middle-class, and he can say that about them is so queer and strange ways—I just rejoice about that, I rejoice reading his prose, and this is *translated* prose! Can you imagine what it would be like in the German? Even more passionate. So I look to writers like that, I look to a lot of the South American writers. We talked about magical realism. What is 'magical realism'? Basically it's something lunatic, it's something crazy. It's something that exists in a society whether or not we know about it as real or logical. It has been written about as though it *were* real and logical. So Garcia Marquez can say 'In Colombia, yes, these things do happen in my town. Yes, we may believe it or not' but by the same token he is actually saying I have something historical here too to talk about, and this is lunatic, this is high lunacy, this is crazy, coming from a people who believe more in ghosts than in reality.

And that's what's magical about it, what's interesting about that. Whereas as I think realist writers, writers who stick so close to depicting their society,

and unfortunately I see Australian writing as following this path, that a lot of it—apart from Rodney Hall or someone like that—is actually just describing what you know already, and a society that only describes what it already knows is a society devoid of real imagination. So I am actually striving and striking out for those important things outside of what is logical and reasonable. And I'm doing that from a writer's point of view and I don't have a set agenda either. If I did I would obviously not be a writer but quite simply declare or lecture on it.

MD: You obviously wanted to be a writer fairly early on and it sounds as if you never thought of doing anything else.

BC: By default. I think the fact is that I always deluded myself into thinking that I should have been a lawyer; and I know that I could never be a lawyer because I hate speaking publicly, I hate standing up, I hate arguing. It's a cultural thing as well. From the Hong Kong culture I came from, when you argued with someone it was terribly bad manners. If you disagreed with someone's point of view—let's say if you sat down and said 'Oh, isn't John Howard wonderful!' and I know that I disagree totally with that—to say so would be terribly bad manners. You are a guest in my house—I couldn't possibly say that. And if you believe that, fine, let's leave it and talk about something else. That is the kind of thing I was brought up with, so I could never possibly be a lawyer in an Anglo-Saxon society. So that would be a failure. I think that to be a writer is in many ways because I suddenly found reading, and I found writers, as a teenager, to be more conducive and more congenial as friends of mine than I would ever know in real life. In other words from the age of 13 onwards Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and specifically some of the French writers like Dumas would have been writers who had such an effect on me as friends. These are the only people I could go to. These are the people I could pull off a shelf and enjoy, because I can't talk to anyone else. So, yes, by default.

MD: And now you enjoy that being an outsider, who is not being actually lumped into one particular group. If things get a little too cosy you might say sorry ...

BC: Yeah, get kicked out (laughs) I think that's also one of the duties of this perceived role. I probably knew nothing about it before—now I can actually think I do have some cachet actually doing it, without feeling terribly guilty.

One of the hard things about being a writer … When I was in my twenties, for instance, I never called myself a writer. It was too hard because in this society people say once you are a writer, well what are you going to write, how much do you earn? People still say that, they say 'What kind of novels?' It's very difficult to say: I say I write a novel, a novel is a thing in itself. So I get into all sorts of fictional excuses: 'Oh my last one was a thriller, a spy story' (laughs). I think there is no understanding in society of what a writer is.

The truism is that everyone is a writer. But in France or Germany, if you are a writer you are in the intellectual class. I don't want to be arrogant about this but you are accepted into the intellectual class as having something to say.