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The Saturday Paper Quiz Night has been held in partnership with State Library Victoria, State Library New South Wales, and Melbourne International Film Festival.

Quiz Night is an evening packed full of trivia, food and fun. The event routinely sells out in less than two weeks, tickets are sought after by The Saturday Paper Quiz enthusiasts and newcomers alike.



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Melbourne Theatre Company

...to need the group's warnings ahead of the Black Summer bushfires. "The last government had closed doors and closed minds," Mullins said, noting that the incoming one had already "opened the door". Bowen, when pushed on whether he would consider the 75 per cent emissions-reduction target that the group advocates for, returned to crowing about a mandate, claiming that Labor had to stick to its election pledge. ("Forty-three per cent is a lot better than 26-28 per cent," Mullins said diplomatically.) Labor's doors may indeed be open. But amid reports it has now backed in Woodside's Scarborough gas project (which will make its lacklustre 2030 target even harder to achieve), just how open are its minds?

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GOOD OPINION **ADVANCE AUSTRALIA WHERE**

"We're an independent nation. We have our own unique identity and culture ... it's time that we start the serious conversation once again about what comes next for

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The Politics

Thursday, June 2, 2023. Cut through the politics with Rachel Walkers. A daily newsletter from The Monthly, delivered every weekday afternoon.

TODAY **GASLIGHT ON THE HILL?**

Former SEN fire and rescue commissioner Greg Mullett and Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen at a press conference earlier today. Image © Mick Twiss / AAP Images

Labor's energy minister's door may be open, but is that true of his mind?

It was noteworthy that Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen had members of Emergency

24 MAY 21 - 27, 2022 THE SATURDAY PAPER.COM.AU

Antigone Kefala **Late Journals**

Claire Keegan **Small Things Like These**

ard-winning novelist. med destiny with his family. Through the lens of Keegan presents a palpable and violence and of how between compassion and personal breakdowns (specifically in the Ireland of 1985, its work and community on the pages of Mary in John Synge. This ace, both literary and the book's power.

THE SOUND INSIDE ON STAGE FROM 20 MAY BOOK NOW

by Adam Rapp

The Monthly

June issue

The Monthly

Victory by Leah Blake

BUY PRINT ISSUE

FEDERAL POLITICS

A defeat for the true deceivers

By Richard Dennis

The demise of Morrison's Liberals paves the way for a transformative parliament

Message slices, y slices will acently them a hat does welcome.

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Melbourne Theatre Company's **Come Rain or Come Shine**

This month, the Helpmann Award-winning team behind the smash hit *Ladies in Black* returns to Melbourne Theatre Company with a sweetly stirring new boutique musical, *Come Rain or Come Shine*.

An adaptation of Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's wildly comic short story about music, memory and lifelong friendship, this world premiere will feature original songs by Tim Finn and the incredible talents of Gillian Cosgriff (*Harry Potter* and *The Cursed Child*), Angus Grant (*RuPaul*) and Chris Ryan (*As You Like It*).

A funny, bittersweet ode to the bonds that tie us together, even when life seems more cloudy than sunny, you can catch this stunning new musical on stage from June 20 at Southbank Theatre.

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About the play

Ray, Emily and Charlie have been the best of friends since university. As students, Ray and Emily bonded over their mutual adoration of the Great American Songbook, while Emily fell in love with Ray's roommate, Charlie, despite his terrible taste in music. Nearly thirty years later, Emily and Charlie are happily married and there's always a bed for Ray at their place when he visits from overseas. But on Ray's latest sojourn, Charlie has a favour to ask that could change everything.

LEARN MORE

Coming up at MTC

Laurinda

Adapting Alice Pung's award-winning book, writer and comedian Diana Nguyen and director Petra Kalive bring *Laurinda* to the stage for a fresh and feisty new work. This inclusive, funny study of a woman caught between cultures and class plays from August 6.

Cyrano

Virginia Gay's joyous, gender-flipped retelling of *Cyrano de Bergerac* makes a triumphant return to the stage this September. Packed with music, wit and aching romance, Gay freely adapts and reimagines the classic play to bring us a delightfully self-aware *Cyrano* for our times.

Sydney Film Festival

The Monthly

By Jackson Ryan

The case of UNSW and an "anti-cancer superdrug" highlights issues with self-regulation in universities about what constitutes research misconduct

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The Saturday Paper

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Exclusive: Qantas considers paying back JobKeeper

Rick Morton As the national carrier faces increasing criticism of its conduct, a former minister likens the airline's management to 'terrorists'.

NEWS

Australia's greenhouse emissions are still rising

Mike Seccombe New figures show Australia has little chance of meeting its emissions targets. After a period of flatlining figures, the numbers are going up sharply.

What a Trump 2024 election victory would mean for Australia

Martin McKenzie-Murray The frontrunner for the Republican nomination is the centre of at least four criminal investigations, but even jail wouldn't prevent him running for office. What would his return mean for Australia's relationship with its most powerful ally?

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Tribal clashes lead to curfews, troops in India's Manipur

Jonathan Pearlman is The Saturday Paper's world editor and the editor of Australian Foreign Affairs.

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PwC Offices in Melbourne © Ian Hanley / Alamy

Industry Weakens our Businesses, Infantilises our Governments and Harms our Economies. Consultants, they argue, have hollowed out state capacity: "The more governments and businesses outsource, the less they know how to do." Labor is now committed to winding back the federal government's reliance on consultants and has promised that more jobs will be filled by public servants.

About time. In her letter of public apology, Stubbs refers to the 10,000 hand-working, values-driven PwC staff and partners, and derides the fact that, in the tax business, parts of the leadership "allowed for profit to be replaced by purpose". But as Senator Barbara Pocock put to me, what is the purpose of a big consulting firm if it is not to make a profit? "Their business model requires the aggressive pursuit of cash. To pretend that there is a value ethos that can be restored is nonsense." Of course protecting the firm's social license is crucial for its capacity to make money, but it is a means not an end. Unlike the public service, serving the public good is not the prime reason for PwC's existence, nor that of other consultancy firms. A Senate committee is currently investigating the management and integrity of consulting services to the federal government. It is due to report by September 26.

Treasurer Minister Katy Gallagher has said that the federal government's over-reliance on consultants was worse than she had realised. "We're taking steps to rectify that, but it's going to take a bit of time because of the way the imbalance has occurred over particularly the last five to seven years," she told ABC radio.

A question of character

It was the embodiment of male entitlement, of male privilege, of male overconfidence – of male stupidity.

in 2020, that she called him out on it and he had to apologise, and that she had told at least one Liberal colleague at the time. Then there's a third woman with allegations against Van, anonymous at the time of writing but thought to be a former Liberal MP too. All denied, of course.

It was provocative in the extreme, therefore, for Van to be involved in the outrageous, concerted Coalition attack over Labor's support for Higgins. And it was the embodiment of male entitlement, of male privilege, of male overconfidence – of male stupidity – for Van to think he could get away with tipping a bucket on Labor in parliament over this, given that at least three MPs knew of allegations against him.

When Van declared that as "parliamentarians we need to be focused on setting the standard for all Australians", it hit Thorpe's considerable fuse.

"We know what you were doing!" she interjected. "I can't believe they put you up to make this speech."
A few more interjections from Thorpe later, followed the next day by her moving speech not naming Van but describing being "followed aggressively, propositioned and inappropriately touched" in Parliament House, and Van's time was nearly up. When Thorpe's criticisms were reinforced by Stoker's allegations and news of a third complainant, forcing Dutton to act, Van presented all the way to the crossbench.

Dutton had at first denigrated Thorpe as someone with "a lot of issues" who needed "to seek support". This echoed Morrison's disgraceful faux compassionate comments designed to stigmatise and undermine former MP Julia Banks when she dumped the Libs and went to the crossbench over Coalition bullying in 2018.

Then Van suddenly became an unsalvageable political liability. Dutton cut him loose from the Liberal Party, saying he wasn't satisfied with Van's responses to the allegations and publicly calling for him to resign from the Senate.

That women have agency. That they're not going to shut up and take it any more. And that this has consequences, personal and electoral. The party's "man problem" has been prominently on show since Banks first shone a bright light on the British man cave Coalition politics has become, which Higgins' and former staffer Rachelle Miller's experiences underlined, and which the closing of Liberal ranks around former Morrison cabinet minister Christian Porter came to symbolise.

The flow-on effects from Higgins' willingness to speak out about her experience in a Parliament House cabinet minister's office changed history, contributing to federal power changing

I asked Senator Pocock why the PwC scandal had so angered her. She was an academic at the University of South Australia's business school when she researched the working lives of people such as nurses and retail workers whose incomes were well below \$100,000 a year. According to *AFR*, the incomes of PwC partners ranged, in pre-pandemic times, from \$380,000 for junior partners to \$3.9 million for the most senior partners. As Pocock says, "These consultants, scooping up public money, lived on a different planet from nurses and retail workers, and most of the rest of us."

For Senator O'Neill, her anger stemmed from the importance of truth and integrity in the conduct of business. Our superannuation, our pensions, our public services, all depend on telling the truth about the books, she said.

While I was writing this essay, the final report from the royal commission into the roboadvice scheme was released, documenting the coldest cruelty with which previous Coalition governments illegally went after mealy amounts of taxpayers' money from poor and vulnerable people. At the same time, a bunch of very rich men were scheming to rob the public purse and thought they could get away with it. **TM**

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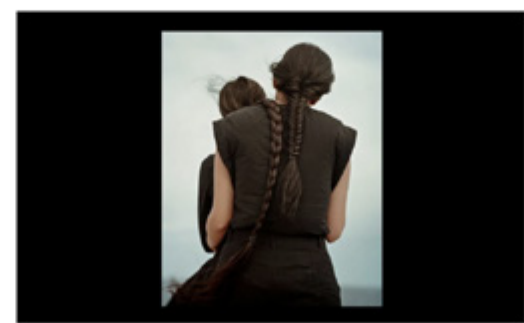
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PHOTOGRAPHY

Hoda Afshar: A Curve is a Broken Line

By Steve Dow

The first major solo exhibition by the Iranian-born, Melbourne-based photographer showcases her collaborative style, in which

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World US accuses China of 'vener of neutrality' regarding Russia



Chinese President Xi Jinping holds a welcoming ceremony for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Beijing on Wednesday. Zhai Jianlan / Xinhua via AFP

States this week said idling with Russia in Xi Jinping hosted a 'Belarus, Alexander's agreement' to rotate the leadership across Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The decision to appoint Wang helped to address these concerns. Kiribati withdrew from the forum last year but has now formally rejoined.

Before the forum meeting, Australia's Foreign Affairs minister, Penny Wong, visited Kiribati and offered a range of support, including assistance with upgrading a port and rebuilding a wharf.

The show of unity by the 18-member forum, which includes Australia and New Zealand, may set back efforts by China to form its own Pacific bloc. Beijing tried last year to sign a wide-ranging deal with the 10 Pacific countries that recognise China but the offer was rejected.

Wang has accused China of trying to dominate the Pacific and famously clashed with a Chinese diplomat at a forum meeting in Nauru in 2018. Nauru is one of only four Pacific nations that recognise Taiwan.

Democracy in retreat
Israel: Following the shooting of two Israelis, hundreds of settlers went on a rampage in a Palestinian town in the West Bank, leaving one person dead in scenes that an Israeli general this week described as a "pogrom".

The settler attacks, in the small town of Huzara, came amid escalating violence in the West Bank, including a recent rally by Israeli forces in Nablus that led to a gun battle that left 11 Palestinians dead.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting to discuss the violence, the third such meeting since Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government – the most right-wing in the country's history – took office two months ago.

Kiribati, Nauru and other Micronesian countries over the election in 2022 of the current secretary general, Henry Puna, who is from Cook Islands in Polynesia. Micronesian countries believed there was a 'gentlemen's agreement' to rotate the leadership across Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The decision to appoint Wang helped to address these concerns. Kiribati withdrew from the forum last year but has now formally rejoined.

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The settler descended on Huzara last Sunday, hours after a Palestinian killed two

Israeli brothers who were driving through the town. Following calls for a march to "seek revenge", an estimated 400 settlers, some armed with knives and guns, spent about five hours in the town, setting houses and cars alight. On Monday, Palestinian gunmen shot and killed an Israeli American on a highway near Jericho in the West Bank.

Israeli Major-General Yehuda Fuchs admitted this week that the Israeli military had not been prepared for the settler attacks in Huzara and had failed to anticipate the number of people or the level of violence.

What happened in Huzara was a pogrom carried out by law-breakers," he told Israel's Channel 12.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas described the settler violence as "terrorist acts", saying the Israeli government was "fully responsible".

Fox is being sued by Dominion Voting Systems, a voting machine company, that says its reputation was damaged by the airing of accusations the broadcaster knew were false. In the US, unlike in Australia, those suing for defamation must demonstrate that the publisher acted with malice.

Fuchs has argued it was entitled to report on Trump's claims but that its executives did not endorse the lies being spread about the election.

Norm Eisen, CNN's legal analyst, said in a tweet on Tuesday that the deposition was "absolutely devastating to Fox... Stunning proof of lie!"

In his deposition, Murdoch, when asked whether Fox endorsed the claims, said "Not Fox. But maybe Lou Dobbs, maybe Maria Butters but not Fox."

far-right networks. So, Fox began giving wide – often supportive – coverage of the election fraud proponents, even though, as Fox anchor Sean Hannity has admitted, "I did not believe it for one second".

In an extraordinary court filing that emerged this week, Murdoch acknowledged under oath that when several Fox commentators – including Hannity, Lou Dobbs and Maria Bartiromo – endorsed the stolen election claims, he chose not to intervene.

In a deposition lodged as part of a \$US1.6 billion defamation suit against Fox, Murdoch said: "I would have liked us to be stronger in denouncing it, in hindsight."

Asked whether he could have prevented Giuliani and Sidney Powell, another Trump lawyer, from appearing on air, he replied: "I could have. But I didn't."

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“Our media partnership with Schwartz is an integral component of our audience engagement strategy. Our seven-year relationship goes from strength to strength, through our shared vision to promote positive impacts for our audiences across all business goals. We love working with Schwartz and intend to for many years to come.”

— Marketing & Communications Manager, Malthouse

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World

Macron's clarion call on Taiwan 'a PR coup for Xi'

Jonathan Pearlman is The Saturday Paper's world editor and the editor of Australian Foreign Affairs.

counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, attend the official welcoming ceremony in Beijing. (Ng Han Guan / Pool / AFP)

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THE END OF IMAGINATION

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In complete contrast were the witnesses who had suffered in so many ways. Seeing them finally being listened to by the commissioner, and being supported by the commissioner's team, was refreshing and heartening. The front-line staff from Centrelink who gave their stories had also suffered at the hands of a corrupt government, which gave no regard to the pain they were directed to bestow upon the vulnerable. The government and senior public servants' culpable behaviour is now set out in black and white in the commissioner's report and cannot be denied – even though we know they will try. They've lied from the start and they will keep doing so.

But my son will be remembered for the beautiful soul he was: a gorgeous, creative artist and musician, an exceptionally soft and wonderfully kind young man, loved by family, friends and colleagues.

Rhys and every other victim did not deserve the cruel and evil treatment that was brought down upon them through deception and callous indifference, by a greedy, self-absorbed, power-hungry cohort.

My grief and my anger towards every one of the people involved in managing this scheme will take years to manage. I know that. But I was not going to stop pursuing the truth, not only for our beloved Rhys but for everyone harmed during this atrocious time. My sincere hope is that the fallout from the revelations of the commission will serve notice to anyone in public office, from the prime minister down, that such callous treatment of vulnerable people will never again be allowed.

Anthony Albanese will look like the mug who gambled everything and lost, and Peter Dutton like the cat that swallowed the canary shit.

the Voice can look unreasonable. Crippling mortgages and rents, rising energy prices, housing shortages, stagnant wages, gouging corporations. But does anyone heed their cries for help?

While the world grows more perilous each day, we talk about the Voice. Climate catastrophes, pandemics, dictators, unhinged billionaires and wars. Truth evades, ignorance and cheats prosper and "superintelligent" machines, according to their inventors, threaten to destroy humanity before the climate, viruses or nuclear weapons get their turn. We dwell on the fringes of an ever more alien and unknowable reality, and fear there will be no future for our children. On none of these developments is our opinion required – but it is compulsory on the Voice.

The longer you look from this disaffected point of view the more it becomes clear that there is only one sensible way to go – vote "Yes". Vote "Yes" to the Voice and be done with it. Get it off the table. Because if "No" wins, we can be sure the debate will not go away. There will be a few weeks of wailing and gnashing, doors will descend on one half of the population and especially on the people whose grand idea it was to wave hope and despair into poetry. Meanwhile, much of the world will be confirmed in its opinion that we are racist, Anthony Albanese will look like the mug who gambled everything and lost, and Peter Dutton like the cat that swallowed the canary shit.

And then it will be back. And it will keep coming back, until one day a Voice or a Treaty or something of the kind, will pass. And people will ask why they didn't do it the first time. If you wish the Voice to hell – make sure you vote for it. Then maybe the debate will shift to, well, survival – one's own and the planet's, or something related to both of them, such as AI/KUUS.

Here are some other shoes to try on. Towards the end of 2021, Albanese is desperate to win an election, and at least half the population is desperately hoping that he will. He decides that he will not jeopardise his party's chances by allowing an awful government and an equally awful prime minister to wedge him on defence. Imagine, in the feverish mental landscape of an election, Albanese is painted as weak on China, weak on the US alliance, weak on national security. Weak on jobs in South Australia. Imagine if the weakness proves fatal, and he loses the election to Scott Morrison over a few submarines that may never be built.

So rather than hand them a hammer with which to beat him, Albanese gives the Morrison government's \$368 billion AUKUS

A modest proposal

Comment by Don Watson

LET US FOR A MOMENT walk in the shoes of those good citizens who think they might vote "No" in the Voice referendum. Not Bolt's or Dutton's – none of the Murdoch-LNP axis – but the footwear of humble, silent folk. Imagine yourself not entirely unsympathetic to the struggles of Indigenous people, but thinking that no section of the citizenry should be granted an avenue to power that others lack. I know! But wait – the pounding of your progressive hearts be still! You're in the shoes of others, and from where they stand

ACCA

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Nº. 456

23

Visual art

Pierre Bonnard's mastery of colour and light is on full display in NGV International's extraordinary winter exhibition.



Pierre Bonnard. Designed by India Mahdavi at NGV International, Melbourne. Lillie Thompson

Bright between

Exclusive: Joyce sought to sell government a stake in Qantas

Rick Morton Following the resignation of Qantas chief executive Alan Joyce, fresh details have emerged regarding his relationship with government.

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our, happy to play proportion. It is immediately in room. We are of patterns, first is a giant in that mirrors the of Self-Portrait. A fellow ard's collective weight, or The we see some eloping. The omen mid-dance capturing not embrace of it itu but painted y. Hints of the luminescent ard's tones of greeting: his mix green, avocado, a visionary gift either side by is of the "theatre tly lithographs ts at night. These d will later portray ight (1900) the p upstairs window ere figures, trees

The problem in this first gallery is there's not enough room for the paintings, lithographs, fans, screens and prints to breathe. With so much work, so much colour, pattern and architecture, one might be inclined to rush through and miss some of its highlights. If you can stand the clutter, spend some time in front of *Le Chat Blanc* (1894), one of dozens of depictions of cats within this exhibition. It is also arguably one of the world's best. Then there's *Intimacy* (1891) with its flat planes and wafts of smoke from the painter's pipe mixing with those of his subjects' cigarettes. Don't miss Swiss painter and Nabi collaborator Félix Vallotton's *The Poker Game* (1902) and *The Dinner, Lamp Effect* (1899). Both paintings look thoroughly modern, like William Eggleston photographs or film stills from an ominous 1990s family drama.

In the exhibition's last two rooms, the collaboration with Mahdavi shines. Here we see evidence of what British author Julian Barnes calls Bonnard's dramatic "breakout from half-lit, dark-hued intimism to bright hotness... the awakening first to yellows, oranges and greens, then to pinks and purples". The rooms in which we experience this "bright hotness" are some of the gallery's largest. They're decked with bright yellow patterned wallpaper, golden soft furnishings and the luxury of space. This affords the viewer an opportunity to stand back, encouraging what the Tate Modern called, at its 2019 Bonnard exhibition, "slow looking". Moving through these later works, you'll see it's not just the colour palette that shifts: the subject matter turns inward. As he aged, Bonnard focused his attention to the landscape of the domestic. He painted his wife, Marthe, bathing, superimposing several layers of colour to create a shimmering effect. We see canvas after canvas featuring scenes from apartments in the south of France, tables

Pierre Bonnard: Designed by India Mahdavi is showing at the NGV International until October 8.

NEWS



Liberal 'Yes' supporters threatened with losing preselection

Karen Middleton The leader of the Liberals for Yes organisation says party members have told her they are being threatened with losing preselection if they campaign in favour of voting 'Yes' at the referendum.



The fallout from Twiggy Forrest's green conversion

Marc Moncrief As a string of executives resign from Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest's company, and investors question if he's "lost it", the mining magnate is pushing forward with a massive green expansion.

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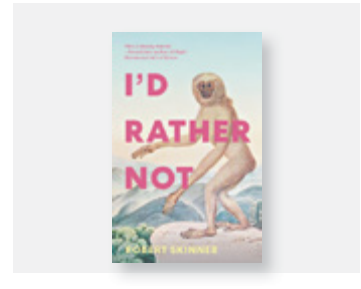
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Robert Skinner I'd Rather Not

Stephen Romei is an editor and critic.

The Irish writer and wit Oscar Wilde said we can be in the gutter but look to the stars. The Melbourne-based writer and humorist Robert Skinner agrees on the location but what he sees is the gutter. "Say what you want about rock bottom," he writes in his whimsical, insouciant memoir *I'd Rather Not*, "but at least it's sturdy."

Skinner's grin-and-bear-it attitude runs through this book, which is his first. Yet I suspect he, too, is looking heavenwards, even if in secret. He writes about his time editing *The Canary Press*, "Australia's greatest (and possibly only) short story magazine", between 2013 and 2016.

He published Australian writers including Maxine Beneba Clarke and A.S. Patric, who went on to win the Miles Franklin, and international authors such as Dave Eggers. Yet the magazine made no money "in the beginning, middle or end". "I... wrote resignation letters, but I never knew who to send them to. I sent one to my mum, who said she liked the characters but didn't understand the ending."

That gently funny line is characteristic of Skinner's self-deprecating humour. The book opens with the author, at 28, deciding that when it comes to work, he'd rather not. This is easier said than done, as he learns from the Centrelink "dole officer": "People, I've found, want you to be busy. Genghis Khan could move into your street and people would say, 'Well, at least he's working'. What follows are jobs and regular

escapes from them. In one of the best chapters, the author is on a camel trek with his parents and the ungulates are unco-operative. "I walked over to the holding pen to see if maybe I had a magic touch with camels. This is the persistent dream of dilettantes: that we will, at some point, uncover a superpower that will make sense of lives filled with false starts, failures and endless dalliances."

Skinner's stories have been published in *The Monthly* and his work has been included in *The Best Australian Essays* and *Best Australian Comedy Writing*. Being a writer in Australia is hard work. Being a comic writer is even harder. That our only award for humour writing, the biennial Russell Prize, was established only eight years ago is an unfunny truth.

One of the challenges is that not all funny bones are the same. Mine was lightly tickled by this slender book that could be a stand-up routine in a pub. Others may shake, rattle and roll. **Black Inc, 176pp, \$27.99** *Black Inc is a Schwartz company*

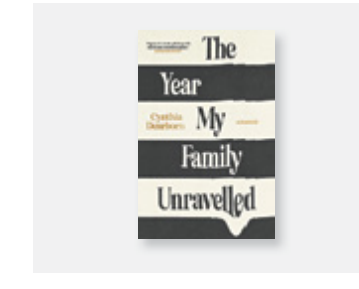
Dementia has been in the spotlight in recent times, largely because an ageing population has made the disease unignorable. Indeed, we have seen the labelling of a new generation - the "sandwich generation" - to recognise a cohort of middle-aged people caught between caring for their growing children and their ageing parents. Cynthia Dearborn's *The Year My Family Unravell'd* is a personal account of the challenges of caregiving for the elderly, though in Dearborn's case she finds herself sandwiched between two countries, Australia and the United States, and two phases of her life, the functional one of her present and the dysfunctional one of her childhood.

The memoir begins with Dearborn learning her father, who lives in Seattle, has had heart bypass surgery. She finds herself in "a freefall of fury and fear - as if in a world devoid of Dad, I too would cease to exist". It is the first sign not only of the fate of Dearborn's father, who develops vascular dementia, but also of the vulnerability of Dearborn herself in relation to him. Five years later, Dearborn leaves Australia for the US, where her father's dementia is deteriorating, hoping to resettle him and her stepmother into a care home. She forsakes her partner and stalls her career to re-engage with a man who is congenial but also enigmatic and volatile: "loving, loveable, violent".

Films such as *Still Alice* (2014) and *The Father* (2020) have represented dementia and the burdens of caregiving, but Dearborn's memoir is unique and precious for its

Cynthia Dearborn The Year My Family Unravell'd

Maria Takolander is a poet and critic.



intimate focus on the relationship between dementia patient and carer. Dearborn unveils the ways in which the caregiver's return to the family fold can involve a return to the quagmire of childhood. Driven by old fears of abandonment, Dearborn regresses to a placatory role, behaviour that stalls the arrangement of sustainable care for her parents and also her own liberation.

Dearborn's memoir is also fascinating for its exploration of how dementia can intersect with wilful forgetting. She knows from others that her father's life was one of extreme deprivation, but when it comes to her father, "nothing has stuck about his own childhood", meaning that his caginess is entirely familial.

Dearborn forgoes the polished aesthetic of the aforementioned films for the raggedness of personal truth, but there is poetry here too: a rising and falling chest, for instance, is said to "perform its ancient labour". However, it is the rawness, the authenticity, of this account that is most compelling and valuable. **Affirm Press, 320pp, \$34.99**

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Image: Cassie Sullivan, *Mayana Tawno Body Country* 2021 (video still). Courtesy the artist

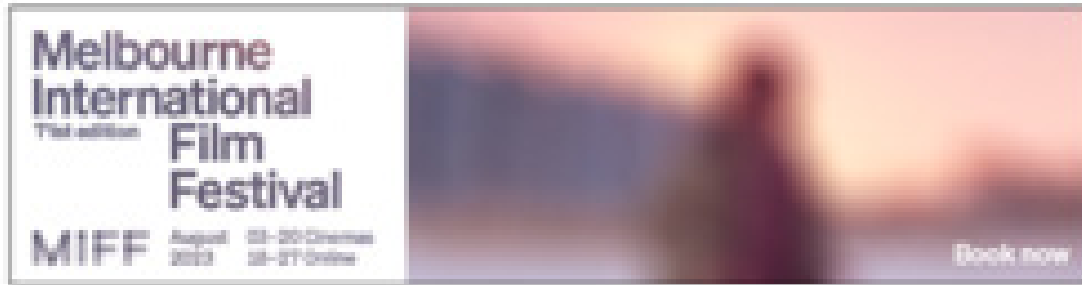
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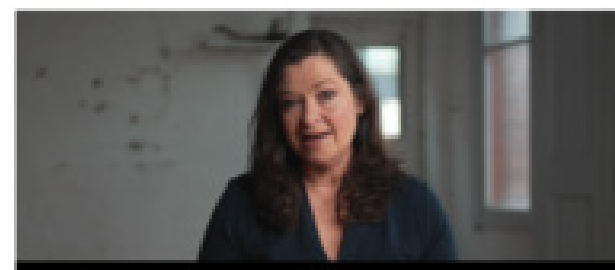


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Culture

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“I naively became a musician because I thought I’d get to make music and for that to be the product and not, you know, for me to become the product.”
— Genesis Owusu

Brodie Lancaster is a critic and the author of *No Way! Okay, Fine.*

The pest is always on the move.

Genesis Owusu is itching, agitating and thinking about shrinking. His second album, *Straggler* – out this month – sees the Ghanaian-Australian artist applying his funk-infused rap to the story of a cockroach determined to hustle through a world full of boots.

It almost goes without saying that Owusu recently discovered Franz Kafka. “The roach character came to me as a metaphor for humanity as a whole,” 25-year-old Kofi Owusu-Ansah tells me from a room in his Canberra family home, where he’s landed after months spent everywhere but. “[It’s] this thing that’s really small and out of control, kind of unloved – a pest, even.”

It’s battling these forces that are way, way bigger than it is, but for some reason it just manages to keep going another day, just manages to struggle through and keep on living. When you think it’s crushed, another one runs out of the woodwork. It’s the insect that’s supposed to survive, like, a nuclear war. That’s kind of how I felt about ... the stubbornness of the human will to survive throughout all the bullshit.

As we speak, sunlight beams in from somewhere on his left and his black Poppy Lissman sunglasses – worn inside for practical reasons and pop star effect – both shield and refract the glare. Today is just the 36th day Owusu has spent back in Canberra all year. “When I’m home I kind of just nestle into bed,” he says. “Finally shut my eyes. It’s definitely a necessary respawn point.”

With his shaved head and cosy hoodie, Owusu is a world away from the dreadlocked performer who wore a massive white quilted jacquard cape when he arrived on the red carpet of the 2021 ARIAs. He stood staunch as a pair of his goons – the name for his balaclava-clad crew who perform alongside him at his famously frenetic live shows – held up a banner bearing his name.

He wore gold in his hair and on his teeth, and left that night with armfuls of silver. *Smiling with No Teeth* – his debut record, which characterised depression and racism as spitting, growling black dogs – picked up album of the year, best hip-hop release, best independent release and best cover art.

Owusu is struck by Kafka’s salesman, Gregor, who wakes up as a giant beetle in *The Metamorphosis*. “One of the first things he thinks is like, ‘Oh shit, how am I going to get to work? What’s my boss going to think?’” Owusu laughs, drawing a line to “the time we are in”. “We had gone through so much, like bushfires, crazy hail, pandemics, economic downfall, mass depression. And everyone just keeps on trucking along like everything’s normal. Like, they put on their suits and ties and they just keep pushing. It’s just another day.”

English teachers at his Canberra high school introduced him to Kafka, as well as Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, but Owusu didn’t pay attention until he was in his 20s. By then, he newly understood the extreme

contradictions that survival requires. “I guess they came back to my life at the perfect point,” he says. “The point where I needed a new source of inspiration, and they came to fill that void.”

Owusu turned his hand to fiction for the first time since university, when he studied journalism and spent his free time writing sci-fi and fantasy, and reading anime and manga. He wrote a short story about “a roach that runs and runs and runs, trying not to get stepped on by God”. “Kind of in the same field as the absurdist literature that I was reading,” he says. To make *Straggler*, he asked himself: what would this story sound like?

Following the success of *Smiling with No Teeth*, Owusu had the luxury of choosing the people to help him answer that question. After doing weeks of “producer speed dating” in Los Angeles, he found his collaborators in Sol Was, fresh off working on *Renaissance* with Beyoncé, and Grammy winner Mikey Freedom Hart, along with Dave Hammer and Andrew Klippel, who also produced his debut. As well as being a producer and keys player in the Genesis Owusu live band, Klippel runs his record label, Ourness, and has been his manager since first encountering Owusu performing at Groovin the Moo festival in 2015.

Owusu was in year 12 at the time, and had been named a finalist in triple j’s *Uncut* High competition. Years earlier, his older brother Kofi, who performs as Citizen Kay, had turned the study in the Owusu family home into a studio. “His friends would be coming in and out, recording their shitty raps while they were in high school,” says Owusu. “They grew up in a ‘musically diverse household’: the sound of Kofi’s Rage Against the Machine CDs trickled out of one room, as their father played Ray Charles, Michael Jackson and Bob Marley (‘he was into anything with an interesting album cover’) in another. “We had just immigrated from Ghana as well,” he says. “So there was a lot of Ghanaian highlife music.”

Owusu was writing short stories and poetry, and his brother encouraged him to branch into rap. “I would’ve been 14 when I wrote my first verse,” he says. “That was also around the time I was hitting puberty so I had this massive beard, and my voice was already this deep.” Both helped when, eventually, Genesis Owusu and Citizen Kay began performing together in Canberra nightclubs. “I was 16 and living this double life, like a high school student by day and doing all these gigs by night.”

Owusu’s mother was the leader of her church’s gospel choir, and he dutifully attended every Sunday until he was 18. “I knew pretty early on that it wasn’t really for me,” he says. “But as someone who was writing short stories already, I really did love the parables and the lore of Christianity and Abrahamic religions. The characters and the imagery and the symbolism – that’s something that has always stuck with me. I’ve put a lot of that in all of my music.”

The world opened up just in time for the newly minted Owusu to share his debut record with it. He and his band performed on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in 2022, and this year he and the goons ambled

onto the stages of both the Sydney Opera House – where he performed with a 40-piece symphony orchestra – and Madison Square Garden.

In 2022, his headline show at the Enmore Theatre in Sydney went so hard so fast, the floor collapsed just a couple of songs into the set. A year later and on the other side of the world, Genesis Owusu joined Bloc Party as the supports for the pop-punk band Paramore at New York City’s legendary (and structurally sound) 20,000-seat venue.

“One thing that’s a constant is when you’re the support act, you gotta fight a bit harder,” he says. Owusu’s live show is famously “kind of left-field”. At the Garden, it began with him balanced precariously on the shoulders of his goons, who were covered with a cloak. “I’m like, eight feet tall, wobbling onto the stage,” he says. “I always love [seeing] the looks of pure confusion and terror and disgust.”

But that was the old show. *Straggler* sees a new era of Genesis Owusu. “Transformation is always kind of the aim of the game,” he says. He talks of ripping his hair out and dyeing a red stripe down the centre of his shaven head. “I love creating new things and I love being a part of that to be created. I love making myself like a character to be created and altered as well.”

Owusu knows people are watching, listening and taking notes. He’s found it simpler – safer, even – to keep his personal identity as Kofi distinct from the character of Genesis Owusu. “Especially in this album, Genesis Owusu kind of feels like it’s becoming more and more of a separate person,” he says. “That’s a cool and creative thing. But it’s almost a coping mechanism as well.”

He describes “existential jarrings with the profession [he’s] in”, the contradictory expectations of being a social media personality as well as a musical artist, and the experience of parasocial relationships, the intense connections fans forge with an artist without their reciprocation or knowledge.

“I naively became a musician because I thought I’d get to make music and for that to be the product and not, you know, for me to become the product,” he says. “I feel really weird about that. I feel weird about, like, me and my life being consumed the way that it is.”

At any point I could, like, blow up and people can decide ‘Today, Genesis Owusu is the one that we’re going to love and adore and idolise’ – or any day it can be the exact opposite: ‘Genesis Owusu is the one we’re gonna pile on today and Twitter’s gonna have a field day with.’ And I think it’s easier to process that when ‘Genesis Owusu’ is a character and not, like, an identity that I was born with and raised with and have to actually live as every single day.”

Owusu knows that reaching the heights – particularly in Australia, where there is finite space at the top and aspiring to international success can inspire detractors to knock you down a few pegs – often precedes a fall. “I paradoxically have to keep on doing it,” he says – the social media promotion, the diaphanous space between being a known entity and a product to be bought, sold and consumed – until it becomes bigger and

bigger so that I can, you know, continue to survive off this music and continue to keep eating off this music. It’s kind of like I see my biggest fears and I just keep running towards them.”

Your master is a system / Your master is a suit / Your master is a dollar ... Your master is a planet ... Your master is absurdity / God bless the trash

On “The Old Man”, the final track on *Straggler*, Owusu makes one final introduction. After meeting his insect-like hero, we hear from “the Old Man waiting in the sky just to fuck [his] life up”. “The God character essentially [is] an accumulation of all of these huge, invisible forces,” Owusu tells me. “Whether they’re actually natural and uncontrollable or man-made forces that have somehow become greater than we can handle, like, you know, capitalism and bureaucracy and whatnot.”

Across the narrative of *Straggler*, Owusu – or the thinly veiled character he can channel his thoughts through, from a safe distance – vacillates between running from and ignoring threats, falling victim to nihilism and rejecting its lure, favouring blissful ignorance and seeing the world for what it is. “It would be really easy to just close my eyes to everything and just pretend that everything’s all good,” he says, “but I got to keep stepping, I got to keep pushing.”

By the record’s end, he’s settled on something close to optimism. “It’s not a happy ending, it’s not a sad ending,” says Owusu. “It’s really not even an ending. I feel like that’s the point of acceptance.”

He could have written “a very Hollywood-style” ending to the roach’s journey, he says. One that would tell the story of his hero climbing a mountain and encountering a field of flowers on the top.

“When in reality, after you climb a huge mountain, there’s going to be another huge mountain waiting for you to climb. But the beauty of that is that, after every mountain, you become a slightly better climber.”

ACMI

primarily thinking of the national interest in terms of foreign policy, but it is also true of domestic policy. The prime minister must govern not just on behalf of those who voted for his party but also for those who didn't, and this is where Morrison's idea of national interest collapses into an unstable collection of voter cohorts, only some of which he considers worth wooing.

Prime among them, *Guardian Australia's* Katharine Murphy said, are blokes who might vote Labor. She wrote this in March 2021, as Morrison was buffeted by women's anger, prompted by the way Brittany Higgins' allegations had been pushed aside, and swelling to encompass the failure of many workplaces to protect women from sexual harassment.

If you feel that Morrison is not talking to you, Murphy said, you are right: he isn't, because he thinks more like a campaign director than a prime minister as he searches, again, for a narrow path to Coalition victory with blokes in hard hats backing him in.

If your votes are locked in, then you are of little interest. There are many ways to out the electoral pie, and so many people Morrison is not talking to: university staff and students, artists and musicians, people who live in inner-city suburbs, poorly paid women care workers, trade union members, fans of the ABC, public sector workers, Indigenous Australians, young people who rent... in fact, anyone in a demographic category very likely to vote Labor or Green. But this is almost half the country. The two-party breakdown of the vote in 2019 was 7,344,813 for the Coalition and 6,906,580 for Labor. This is a lot of people to be excluded from the prime minister's attention.

A focus on the votes of the undecided rather than on solving national problems explains much of the government's behaviour. The "sports rorts" affair is telling: the recommendations of the responsible department were overturned by the minister, Bridget McKenzie, with strong suspicion that the prime minister's office was involved. There were rumours of a colour-coded spreadsheet determining the funding decisions, though no smoking gun has been uncovered.

In December last year, Nine newspapers published a comparison of the amount of grant money going to Coalition and Labor seats since the 2019 election: \$1.9 billion went to those held by the Coalition, \$530 million to Labor ones. When Morrison was asked to explain why Dutton's seat of Dickson received \$43 million while the neighbouring Labor seat of Lilley got only \$932,000, he laughed it off, saying, "Dickson must have a very good local member." To me, Morrison's reply was even more shocking than the grant discrepancy. Not only was the government openly bribing people to vote for it, Morrison seemed to be threatening them, implying that if they voted Labor, they couldn't really expect their needs to be met. He really was happy to be prime minister for only half the country.

And if you live in Victoria, where there are fewer marginal seats than in Queensland and New South Wales, don't be surprised that your state received less federal funding for transport infrastructure per head of population than the battleground states, or that it received not a dollar from the \$7.1 billion regional investment fund controlled by National Party leader Barnaby Joyce.

For four years, from October 2000 to late 2004, Scott Morrison was the state director of the NSW Liberal Party. Too often he governs as if he still is, with far more interest in polling, focus groups and electoral strategy than on governing, and with far

Not only was the government openly bribing people to vote for it, Morrison seemed to be threatening them.

more attention to the factional battles of the NSW branch than a prime minister should have time for.

Morrison's skills in electoral strategy delivered for the Coalition in 2019. Despite Labor being ahead in the polls for years, Morrison was able to find his path to victory by carefully targeting marginal seats in Queensland and New South Wales. In March, he promised the Coalition party room that he would do it again: "I know where we're going and we're going to get there."

This was before the floods, before Labor defeated Steven Marshall's one-term Liberal government in South Australia, before Hillsong pastor Brian Houston resigned because of "inappropriate behaviour", before the revelation that the government of the Solomon Islands was negotiating a security deal with China. Fortune is not flowing Morrison's way, and the narrow path to victory is starting to look like a track for goats.

The Name shifting, the careless inattention, the failure to prepare, the blatant favouring of Coalition and marginal seats with government largesse, the focus on announcements with little follow-up, the absence of serious concern about corruption and integrity, the habitual attempts to wedge Labor, the slim legislative record after three years of government... all can be explained by the almost exclusive focus of Morrison's prime good local member." To me, Morrison's reply was even more shocking than the grant discrepancy. Not only was the government openly bribing people to vote for it, Morrison seemed to be threatening them, implying that if they voted Labor, they couldn't really expect their needs to be met. He really was happy to be prime minister for only half the country.

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Visual art

A Newcastle exhibition asks us to step back into the natural rhythms of time.



An installation view of Isabella Plaza's *Ascending air, unfolding motion* at The Lock-Up. Sam Adams

t of the slow

intoxicating and Ahamat's skill in crafting amplification is undeniable, yet the subtle video lacks visual appeal and meaning. Is this meant to be a cross-species homage to the absurd? By exploring thresholds of perception - what we can just see and not quite hear - Ahamat succeeds in arresting time, but straining one's senses to make sense of the work is frustrating.

Nearby is a large charcoal wall drawing of an ellipsis, *toribi a point in space where nothing exists... and time dissolves* (2022), below which can be seen the ombre dust and broken stannets of the many charcoal sticks Fielden went through to make it. On the opposite wall to drawings, *Of a Second* (2022), attest to Fielden's skill as a hand-engraver - each is a decimal expression of a unit of quantum or human time in millimetre-high numerals drawn with a steel-nib pen.

This is complex stuff if you don't have a head for science. What comes through is Fielden's innovation in using micro and macro drawing techniques and performative elements to give material and embodied form to conceptions of time. One thinks about the time it took Fielden to get to the point where she could draw a zero almost too small to read, and about the stamina required to compose the wall drawing, the scale of which was determined by the height of the artist's body and the reach of her arms, which allowed a step in either direction.

French-born Aude Parichot's installation-in-progress, *Change/Marcel Change/Conversations with Rrose Selavy* (2022), channels Marcel Duchamp, Rose Selavy being the name of the female alter ego he dreamt up with Man Ray. Privileging concepts of serious play and unavoidable change, Parichot will develop the work over coming weeks.

The signs are promising, if messy. The

white walls bear intimations of charcoal drawing and coloured string cuts through the air, a la Fred Sandback. There's a chess set (Duchamp was a chess master), layered projections of unremarkable video footage, some taken from the security camera in the corner of the room during installation, and a sound component - the artist talking to Duchamp, in French and English. Parichot lifts the veil on the creative process by transforming a gallery space into her own studio.

Occupying the former prison yard, Isabella Plaza's photo-based installation, *Ascending air, unfolding motion* (2022), is sensitively situated. Its cyanotype tones complement the rust-coloured walls, while the repurposed easels that support the images poke through the bars above to open sky. We are looking at enlargements of photo collages derived from cyanotypes the artist made of pages pulled from *Cloud Study: A Pictorial Guide* (1960). This was part of an attempt to identify the climatic conditions the day she and her family emigrated from Poland to Australia in 1987, deriving from a photo her father took from the plane.

We see constructed skyscapes that speak to the power of the sublime even while they flirt with abstraction. A torn strip of paper becomes a band of stratoscumulus as layered clouds envelop and absorb each other in high-contrast compositions. This is all-weather art about weather and the extent to which we can take it with us. Viewing the work in the rain would only enhance the experience, another reminder that the optimal way to 'do slowness' is to observe nature or, better still, get out amongst it. ■

Radical Slowness is showing at The Lock-Up, Newcastle, until May 19.



Animated healing

Disney's Oscar-winning animation *Encanto* expertly interrogates the pressure on immigrants to serve communities.



Mirabel, voiced by Stephanie Beatriz, in *Encanto*. Courtesy of Disney

Film

Ruby Homod is a writer and PhD candidate at UNSW Sydney.

This review contains spoilers.

"It's all about giving back to the community where you live." Logan resident Usman Chaudhry told reporters when he his Almaadrya Muslim community rallied to assist victims of the recent devastating floods. Also dubbed "true community heroes" by journalists were "recently settled Pacific Islander seasonal workers" in Lismore who came out "in droves to assist the country they now call home. From lifting community spirits by singing hymns mid-clean-ups, to remaining on-call for any residents who are in need of an extra pair of hands for 45".

Stories of community members banding together in the wake of disaster are not uncommon. Sweet as they are, consuming them can come with an aftertaste when ethnicity and immigrant status become the story. As Algerian-French soccer star Karim Benzema famously quipped, "When I score, I am French, when I don't score or there is a problem, I am Arab." In other words, you can only be one of us when you serve us.

This pressure to serve is expertly interrogated in, of all places, Disney's animated musical *Encanto*, which this week won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film. The Madrigal clan lives in an isolated village somewhere in the mountains of Colombia, some time around the civil wars of the early 20th century. Although headed by the steely Abuela Alma, the star of the extended family is 15-year-old Mirabel. Along with Mirabel, we learn early on that Abuela lost her husband 50 years earlier as they fled their town with only the clothes on their backs and infant triplets in her arms, chased by invading conquistadors. She was, however, granted a miracle in his place: an enchanted village to shield her community from the violence of the outside world and, in homage to the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, a magical, sentient house that bestows upon each child a unique, supernatural gift.

Well, all except Mirabel, who didn't get one. Her oldest sister, Isabela, is *sonorita perfecta*, little child Luisa is as "tough as the crust of the Earth" and their mother, Julieta, cures ill ailments with her cooking. Least we think the family might use these powers to benefit themselves, in the opening number, "The Family Madrigal", Abuela informs us they swear "to always / Help those around us / And earn the miracle / That somehow found us". The unacknowledged survivor's guilt weighs heavily. Fortunately, what Mirabel lacks in magic she makes up for in intuition and empathy. She recognises the family is breaking down, symbolised through literal cracks in the walls, and, terrified that the magic is dying, sets off to find her estranged Uncle Bruno, who could see the future and mysteriously fled the night Mirabel didn't get her gift.

Encanto follows recent Disney offerings that mark a shift in how Disney portrays non-Western cultures. In 2017, Pixar's *Coco* - centred on Mexico's annual Día de los Muertos festival - broke box-office records in Mexico, indicating they were on the right track. *Encanto* is even more impressive. The close involvement of Colombian creatives is apparent in every frame, from the houses and village streets to the 12-string Latin guitar populating Lin-Manuel Miranda's chart-topping, hip-hop-infused soundtrack, to the clothes, the texture of the characters' hair and their facial expressions. In one scene, Mirabel points at an object with her mouth, an attention to detail possible only by working with people embedded in the culture.

The result is not just a musical

that happens to take place in Colombia, cherry-picking elements of its cultural mythology in the process, but one in which Colombian culture takes centre stage. When the central song "Dos Oruguitas" ("Two Little Caterpillars") plays in Spanish over scenes of Abuela and her village fleeing across a river in the darkness, there is no mistaking who and what we are watching. It is impossible not to connect these images to Latin American refugees still forced to flee today - only to be denigrated at their destination.

The film boldly tackles generational trauma in immigrant families caused by extreme suffering and loss, which then manifests in unrealistic expectations: those Madrigal family gifts have become more of a curse than a blessing. Luisa is strong enough to be the town's beast of burden but she's approaching breaking point. "Tía Pepa "controls the weather", but because it storms when she is upset, she struggles to suppress all negative emotions, and Isabela is marrying the perfect man - for her grandmother.

Abuela blames the girlless Mirabel for the cracks but, terrified of losing the magic that sustains her entire village, the matriarch prioritises selfless service at the expense of emotional wellbeing; it is her own toxic perfectionism that is the problem. "The world keeps turning," but work and dedication will keep the miracle burning. "No pressure, our parents and grandparents haven't dealt with the trauma of losing everything," my friend Gigi, a second-generation Latina immigrant, said to me about the impact the film has had on her family. "They still live with the fear of loss and that's why sometimes they hurt us by teaching us to also be afraid ... So many of us are stuck in this time loop of poverty and dispossession, passing down from generation to generation. So, with *Encanto*, it was like - we have to stop this."

Encanto is now streaming on Disney Plus.

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— Partnerships Manager, **Bell Shakespeare**

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Festival

The Darwin Festival, NATSIAA 2023 and the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair generate an intense experience of contrasts.



Part of the NATSIAA exhibition at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Mark Sherwood

Creative hotspot

Tristen Harwood is an Indigenous writer, critic and researcher.

Out over the Timor Sea there is a crack in the cosmic egg. The sun casts a gold and pink glow over the creamy-turquoise sea, making opals before nightfall. I watch this scene while sitting on the white stone of the cliffs at the

from *yuk thanchal* (milkwood) – a material Wikmunee says his ancestors have used since the “beginning of time” – comprises a tree, cockatoos, galahs and a dog, all painted in natural pigments sourced from Country. In the exhibition are 63 artworks by artists from 47 language groups. There is a strong painting presence among the finalists but the exhibited work spans multiple media, themes and materials. The linguistic diversity across the entrants is not reflected

in 2023: “Aboriginal Art – It’s a White Thing”. A more recent event on the loaded August schedule is the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, now in its 17th year. More than 70 Indigenous art centres from across the country have stalls. A number of artists are there along with staff from the art centres. At the Ngukurr Arts stand amid the mob’s incandescent paintings, artist and author Karen Rogers (Ngalkagan), seems to be filling the role of artist and administrator – probably

anthropology was launched at Coconut Studios during the festival. Maurice O’Riordan – Lee’s partner and publisher at Darwin’s dishevel books – tells me the word on the street is the book is an “instant classic”. Having partly read it, I have no trouble believing him. Alongside the book launch, the luminary Darwin artist has a small exhibition of photographs titled *nidling* – a Larrakia word for “together”. These images draw from the colonial archive and Lee’s point-and-shoot snapshots of what might be termed queer, gay, Indigenous, elastic – or all of the above – masculinities. While at the gallery, I sit and speak with Lee for a couple of hours. Afterwards, I understand that it’s exactly moments like these that draw me to Garramilla – the dusted blue of the late-afternoon sky or the smudged light of the sun that you can barely hope to describe and that will always evade definition. ●

The Darwin Festival continues until August 27.

“I was terrified of the whites,” Jo would say. “I used to run away when they came.”

THE SAGA BEGAN IN APRIL 1933, when Australian prospectors Michael and Dan Leahy first penetrated the densely populated Wahgi Valley looking for gold, in what is now Papua New Guinea’s Western Highlands Province. They were not to know it, but the brothers were spearheading the final large-scale confrontation on Earth between one culture and the exploring representatives of another.

Finding payable gold near Mount Hagen, the Leahys settled down to mine it, surrounded by dozens of warlike tribes who were convinced the newcomers were spirits. Michael developed an interest in some of the young women bringing food to the camp. When shown photos of the Leahys 50 years later, the women said: “That’s Micky Leahy! We had sex together ... and then we knew they were men, not spirits! Oh, they were men all right.”

After several years, Michael left the highlands and never acknowledged his mixed-race offspring, including Jo, whose young mother died when he was two. He was raised a highlander on the fringes of Dan’s mining camp, but had nothing to do with his white uncle. “I was terrified of the whites,” Jo would say. “I used to run away when they came.” But when the boy dressed for ceremonies the feathers fell out of his hair. Something was amiss.

When the Japanese invaded New Guinea during World War II, Dan, along with the *kiaps* (patrol officers) and missionaries, departed the Wahgi Valley. Returning in the late 1940s, Dan took responsibility for the feisty mixed-race teenager they nicknamed “Humbug”, and after a rudimentary education started him on the labour line at Korgua, his newly established coffee plantation in the nearby Nebilyer Valley.

Dan was a tough *masia*, whose outlook mirrored the era: “There’s nothing in their lives,” he would say, “that was

Local Pasifika specialists are calling out “tick the box” programs that proclaim local leadership but don’t actually engage with it.

pivotal in securing the loss and damage fund. Journalists ought to talk about that, Gibson challenged – “about the tired eyes, the aching feet and the chapped lips that, day in and day out, fight to ensure we maintain the strides we have made and sustain a culture of progress”. (Oceania scholar Professor Katerina Teaiwa, responding to the same question, counselled against ever starting any story wading on shore from a dinghy – such tropes “are just going to reek of every arrival going back to the 1500s”. And I tried, really I did.)

Victim mythology also pervades media reporting of the climate “frontline”, despite more than a decade of it being called out by innumerable activists, leaders and scholars of Oceania. They argue that doomism and “drowning islands” narratives – those populated with powerless and passive climate “victims” – are distorting, indulgent, supercilious and insidious, lumping disparate populations into an assumed, collective fate. It’s not that Pacific people are deniers, or are unaware of the pressing realities, says McDonnell. Rather, “they’re choosing to act in a way that creates agency, and that creates a narrative beyond just being a victim. And that’s profoundly important.”

An authentic narrative would also recognise that the people of Oceania have been responding to naturally dynamic conditions for millennia. Even as global warming supercharges change, climate impacts will vary in speed and intensity from place to place. In coastal terms, as University of Melbourne geographer and Pacific climate specialist Professor Jon Barnett has observed, what plays out will depend “on their geology, local wave patterns, regional differences in sea-level rise, and in how their corals, mangroves and other wildlife respond”. Doomism threatens to short-circuit useful responses, Barnett warns, and the harm doesn’t end there. He’s also co-authored work on how “drowning islands” tropes perpetuate colonial representations of Pacific islands as “sites of backward-ness, insularity, constraint, fragility and weakness”. An alternative take, drawing on Katerina Teaiwa’s insights, might instead recognise qualities such as hope, transformation, power, beauty, empathy, care and wellbeing.

In the Pacific, local action is powerful. The state is often a remote presence. “We’ve got all this focus on our political systems as the space where climate action should or could happen, and it kind of overstates the capacity of the political system to deliver that change,” says Pacific anthropologist and development specialist at University of Melbourne Dr John Cox.

Meanwhile, on the ground there are existing, strong networks providing local leadership and governance – women’s church groups, for instance. It’s a good rule of thumb, Cox says, that “climate adaptation and resilience building needs to be done at the lowest appropriate level”. So, such networks offer benefits, as well as challenges.

The value of local partnerships and affiliations is everywhere in the development vernacular. But perhaps emboldened by their success running programs through the years of COVID isolation, or maybe just because they’ve had a gutful, local Pasifika specialists are calling out “tick the box” programs that proclaim local leadership but don’t actually engage with it. Colonial attitudes still shape development and humanitarian approaches in the Pacific. Tongan women’s rights activist ‘Ola-Ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki declared in a plainspoken, quickly viral oration delivered at the Australasian AID Conference last November: “That sense of we know better, we are better, and we are here to make things better.”

Drawing on her experiences and research for the International Women’s Development Agency, Guttenbeil-Likiliki described outsider experts running roughshod over highly sensitive local programs, and how she nearly quit her work after 16 years supporting women and children in crisis. “I wanted [experts] to understand their colonial approaches and break the pattern,” she said. “I wanted them to just stop and hand over the resources to the NGOs on the ground.” Urging a long overdue shift from “power over” to “power to”, she finished by sharing a Hawaiian proverb:

The top of the cliff isn’t the place to look at us; Come down here Learn of the big and little currents, face to face.

ARRIVING IN KAVAILO on the southern coast of Karkar Island, I’m ushered to a chair in the shade of a rain tree and politely asked to explain myself to around 50 men and women and a wayfaring audience of kids. I’ve delivered similar presentations to countless communities as a rite of entry, of seeking permission, but it’s always a confronting process, trying to explain the journalistic mission. Not least because in return for their precious time I can promise precisely nothing. My stories are like prayers, I say. I send them into the world with hope but no expectation. I believe in their potential or I wouldn’t have come. On the last point, I don’t confess a nagging crisis of professional faith.

Ward councillor Bobby Sarwau, 43, says he’s witnessed erosion of the seashore over his lifetime. The change has been quick, and not just in the rising tide. He and the other fishermen find they can no longer rely on the traditional calendar or methods to find their catch. It’s very confusing, he says. Local understanding of climate change and ocean science is fragmentary, gleaned mostly from educated diaspora and students on visits home. He’s gained some insights into marine conservation issues through a network of coastal people fighting off some immediate threats to their waters, such as seabed mining and the dumping of toxic tailings by the Chinese-owned Ramu Nickel mine. Sarwau introduces himself as the chairman of the Karkar *sosora* warriors.

Kavailo’s growing population is being squeezed into a shrinking strip of land as the water comes up. The village is



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Image: Imperial Pétrogue Dog 2022, glazed earthenware, 36 x 21 x 17 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London. Photo: Angus Mill



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