

## Australian popular fiction and the moral drama of East Timor

David Callahan<sup>1</sup>

From the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975 until the referendum on independence in 1999 and up until the present, East Timor has been a place whose destiny Australian governments have felt they have the right to intervene in. Indeed, this assumed right goes back to the invasion of neutral Portuguese Timor by Australian forces in World War II, thereby condemning thousands of Timorese to their deaths at the hands of Japanese soldiers. Of this initial assumption of Australia's agency in East Timor there has been surprisingly little creative remediation, although there has been much and moving commentary in non-fiction. The marginality of Portuguese Timor to Australia in the 1940s may be read both in the decision to invade and in subsequent uninterest in interpreting what is one of Australia's closest neighbours. Although the Indonesian invasion and brutal occupation vastly increased the amount of coverage given to the territory, somehow this too was almost never accompanied by the analytical possibilities of creative work. From Tony Maniatty's anguished representation of the period immediately before the invasion, *The Children Must Dance* (1987), through Gail Jones's theoretically reflective short story 'Other Places' (1992), Bill Green's satire on Australian political immorality, *Cleaning Up* (1993), or Libby Gleeson's book for children *Refuge* (1998), to take some of the registers through which the country was dealt with, East Timor was rarely processed in Australia through the protocols of imaginative narrative (on these texts, see Callahan 2010; 2012a; 2012b).

There have, however, recently been a small number of Australian generic fictions in which East Timor occupies roles of differing narrative and moral significance, roles to some extent instrumentalising the nation in ways that are not always congruent with earlier discourses of solidarity for the country's liberation struggle. Since East Timor broke away from Indonesia in 1999, the four books I will talk about use the country as a site of Indonesian violence in which Australians intervene to counter Indonesian intentions and actions in the service of both East Timorese people and what is imagined to be a generalised support among Australian people for the ethical treatment of the underdog, and for the fabled but vague notion of the fair go. But these books can be seen as using East Timor in the exploration of not always compatible discourses: in the first place, such narratives give Australians the opportunity to construct stories in which Australians help, and this naturally produces narratives set in the period in which Australia actually did help: the referendum and post-referendum period (albeit as a 'Reluctant Saviour', as Clinton Fernandes tells us). At the same time, this form of finally being able to write official Australia into positive roles with respect to East Timor is not all that is going on in these texts. Against a background in which Australia's military have been steadily reassigned value and centrality in the nation's story since the low point of Vietnam, East Timor is potentially just one of a repertoire of scenarios in which Australia's military can reenact the national story of bold yet ethical male heroism in uneasy relationships with the agendas of larger and more powerful allies. After all, Australia is also or has been recently present in other conflict zones, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, and yet almost no fiction has been produced of Iraq by Australians and with Australian protagonists, and most of that with Afghanistan as a setting is for children. East Timor, moreover, offers Australia unique possibilities to explore national and ethical issues. As David Wenham's character says in the Australian-Canadian TV miniseries set in the period of the referendum, *Answered by Fire*, 'East Timor's a little bit different. For Australians anyway,' summing up thirty years of Australian shame over his country's acquiescence in Indonesia's actions and failure to honour the debt contracted during the Second World War.

Anita Bell's *Crystal Coffin* (2001) is chronologically the first such generic fiction, a crossover thriller, partly aimed at a teenage readership, but little differentiated from a more avowedly adult thriller. While there are sequences that take place in East Timor, the majority of the book takes place in Australia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Cultures at the University of Aveiro, Portugal.

Only after seventy pages does East Timor feature, when Jayson Locklin, a nineteen-year-old Australian soldier, decides, against the UN rules of engagement, to take on a group of militia who have captured his unit and murdered civilians. His success in this operation contributes to establishing his credentials in the narrative both ethically and as an intelligent action figure, in a context in which, at the time the book was being written, Australian military action in East Timor was overwhelmingly approved of by the Australian public. At the same time, Locklin's actions demonstrate that sometimes it is necessary to act outside approved guidelines, always a popular mythic strategy of the Australian male hero figure. The affirmation of the moral acuity of the lone vigilante figure commonly functions in this manner: by intervening to aid victims whose suffering and lack of adequate defences from other quarters underline the otherwise unsanctioned but in this case necessary actions of the figure who restores justice. It can be seen, however, that Locklin intervenes not simply in favour of East Timorese but rather to save Australian soldiers, diluting the significance of East Timorese people as victims for whom rules might be broken and danger faced. Indeed, East Timor functions principally as a theatre in which a type of masculine heroism can be enacted in a military engagement. Almost nothing of what Australia is doing in East Timor is explained, although it is legitimate to speculate that a book published in 2001 would not need to explain things given the blanket coverage events in East Timor had received in the Australian media during 1999 and 2000. As if to confirm what Australian actions in East Timor at this time had signified, Locklin comments that he is 'amazed at how helpful people could be [in Australia] at the mention of soldiers who'd been stationed in East Timor' (Bell 2001, 285).

James Phelan's *Fox Hunt* (2006), interestingly, includes a very similar plot element: the protagonist, Lachlan, ignores UN directives and penetrates into West Timor in order to try to save sequestered East Timorese from Indonesian troops and East Timorese pro-Indonesian militia. However, even less of the novel takes place in East Timor, as it attempts a global reach (and readership) in its plot involving a lost Soviet advanced technology weapon, leading to action principally in Chechnya, the U.S., Iran and assorted glamorous European locations. Timor only occurs in two sections. Occurring near the beginning, these chapters nonetheless perform an important function in their authentication once again of the hero as a man who puts saving lives ahead of bureaucracy, the latter generally perceived as heartless and obstructive in sites of humanitarian crisis. Positioning the United Nations as the origin of the obstruction permits Australia to be partially relieved of the blame in a scenario in which individual Australians would do more to help East Timorese if not for administrative obstacles imposed by out of touch bureaucrats from other unspecified countries.

East Timor features much more significantly in Mark Abernethy's thriller *Double Back*, which places the country at the centre of a complex, breathless plot replete with the usual people who are not what they seem, double-crossings and last-minute escapes. Once again East Timor serves as the backdrop for Australian heroism at a time when part of the country (near the border with West Timor) was 'the most dangerous eighty square kilometres in the world right now' (Abernethy 2009, 96), authenticating even more the enactment of the conscience that official Australia lacked for the whole period of the Indonesian occupation. Local people are being used in a facility in the Bobonaro district, the victims of an Indonesian attempt to develop an ethno-bomb which kills the more Melanesian East Timorese in particular. The Australian covert operator Alan McQueen is part of the uncovering of the operation, placing himself in danger more than once in order to find out and produce proof of what is happening there.

The fact that events take place in 1999 around the time of the referendum is not irrelevant. The year represents the time when Australia finally acted in a way that its population wanted over East Timor. It is also no accident that the circulation of information to Australian Ministers and government departments is rendered as problematic: 'The one Australian who was actually on the ground in East Timor was not going to be heard' (Abernethy 2009, 26) we read early on, as Government Ministers flounder and anguish over offending Indonesia. Mac and the novel's credentials are clear: 'When Canberra know-it-all's pushed their arguments for appeasing the Indonesian government, they never quite grasped reality ... the appeasers were never going to physically suffer from their own strategy' (Abernethy 2009, 59). It is, of course, a convention of the genre that information circulates badly. That is, it is difficult to find out about things, and then it is difficult to make this information reach who you want it to reach or to be believed or acted on. In

this the genre articulates social divisions that intersect with discourses of class as with discourses of practical activity as opposed to administrative or intellectual activity. As an aid worker on the ground says, 'They're such cowards, those Foreign Affairs bastards' (Abernethy 2009, 176; the worker, Ansell Torvin, transparently representing Lansell Taudevin, Australian aid coordinator in East Timor 1996-1999 and author of the post-conflict memoir *East Timor: Too Little, Too Late*). In the genre's construction of an often physically but always mentally wounded male protagonist it both grants agency and takes it away, in a metaphor of how the action-oriented male is unable to perform his masculinity as competence because he is restricted by the agendas of less masculine men who sit in offices and make diplomatic or business decisions. This, of course, is a convention in many types of male hero genres.

In this context, it takes a maverick figure to represent the conscience of the Australian people as set against the realpolitik, fear and appeasement of the Australian government. Only individuals working against the system, in all of these novels, can act effectively in the case of East Timor, given that the Australian system resists acting either in the interests of East Timor or according to the desires of its own populace (although there are gradations between more or less honourable and perceptive figures). The rebellious male figure is a common icon in both the genre of the thriller and Australian culture in general, so that it is probably too much to expect nowadays a type of colonial-era hero who represents official forces and perspectives in this form of fiction. The investigator in this type of fiction is rather a test of the legibility of the false and manipulative circulation of information in the world, narrative surprise functioning to reveal not simply the protagonist's manipulation by the fallen world, via our manipulation by the narrative, but in addition that ethical standards and objectives are insufficient in a world where the self-maintenance of power has seeped into all spheres and all nations at the expense of human rights or official rhetoric. As Morris Dickstein argues, 'this haunted sense of a tentacular, all-powerful conspiracy catapults the thriller beyond politics into a shallow, helpless fatalism' (Dickstein 2006, 90). That is, whatever the good done by the protagonist, it is against a backdrop of political forces whose priorities cancel any ethics of conviction in favour of a narrowly-defined national interest. This situation also pushes such narratives towards being both nationalistic and anti-nationalistic at the same time, in the sense that individuals do not represent their fallen nations or cultures in stable fashion. An American, supposedly an ally of Australian interests, turns out to be partly behind the Indonesian ethno-bomb, while the facility is finally closed by a Javanese General whose decent old-school ethical standards do not allow him to see his country go down this dishonourable path. Australia, in turn, loses definite contours as a polity given that competing interests and deceit mean that its representatives do not really represent the majority of Australians, leaving the individual protagonist who ostensibly works for his nation adrift in a network of international friends, operatives and connections, suspicious of both obvious enemies and duplicitous Australian officials, a situation that assembles an identity that is Australian but globalised at the same time.

Steven Horne's thriller *The Devil's Tears* was written by an ex-army soldier who had served in East Timor in 2000. However, differently to the other novels, this is a novel mostly telling the story from the point of view of East Timorese people, a strategy which has been found to bring problems of authority when dealing with the trauma of others. From Cesar, a functionary from Dili, and his family, to Leki, a boy who joins Falintil, the novel focuses on the story of local people, as well as on Indonesian officers, and Australians trying to investigate and bring to light evidence of an earlier massacre. In *The Devil's Tears* the ethical connection between motives and actions is seemingly clear: if Australians are only exposed to what is happening in East Timor, this becomes defining in their perception of who is right and who is wrong. Only negatively positioned characters support the official Australian line on East Timor. Nevertheless, the occupation of the voice of other people's suffering in fiction now occasions doubts with respect to the instrumentalising of that suffering, the transformation of suffering into a spectacle for what is always at some level a form of entertainment. The representational issues change to some extent when the suffering exists as memory rather than as events which are happening now. That is, in the latter case, people who suffer are naturally concerned that their situation is represented in ways they recognise as realistic, but in the first place they want the world to know what is happening, accepting to some degree a certain level of mimetic deficit as long as their story is told. When the suffering passes into memory, however, then questions of who should be telling it, and how, become more acute. As all of these novels are post East

Timorese separation from Indonesia, they fall into the latter category, but none of them reflects upon its use of East Timorese stories. The implicit supposition is that if they are on the popularly approved side, then their representation of the suffering of others is simply showing solidarity with those others' history. There are attempts in most such fictions to ensure that their moral grammar is not conjugated rigidly in terms of nationality, so that there will almost always be a good or more than one good Indonesian, as well as traitorous East Timorese and conniving Australians. Nonetheless, one striking difference between fictions such as these and fictions such as those by literary authors like Gail Jones, Tony Maniaty, Timothy Mo, the Portuguese Pedro Rosa Mendes or East Timorese Luís Cardoso is apparent in the low level of self-consciousness of the former with respect to what might appear an odd decision in the first place: to fictionalise real suffering, real humanitarian issues and very recent history when there are hundreds of thousands of people who have memories of what happened to them, and the moral authority to tell them.

Australian shame over twenty-four years of official obstruction was always attacked in excellent non-fiction, ensuring that governments could not count on the issue fading away. Why, then, transform the events into fiction? The same question has been asked and answered repeatedly over recent years, not least in Australia during the controversy set off by Kate Grenville's comments on the relation between novelists and historians with respect to her *The Secret River* (see Grenville 2005, Clendinnen 2006, Curthoys & Docker 2006). Investigators and commentators in many contexts nonetheless tend to arrive at variations on the same conclusion that fiction possesses the ability to build up explanatory speculations capable of developing connections between characters and events to a level of multi-layered density that may not appeal to our sense of the documentary, but rather serve in the organisation of our general moralities. For Ruth Mayer, to take one example:

Fictional texts get a better grip on rearrangements and transformations in public discourse than nonfictional accounts, because they map out the world in speculative terms and thus address dimensions of the political unconscious that more solution-oriented political and journalistic approaches to the same phenomena tend to reason away or repress (Mayer 2007, 2).

The absence of self-consciousness in these generic fictions in which East Timor's recent history is depicted leaves them open to the charge of using East Timor for the benefit of their plots rather than working to support East Timor politically. Charitably, on the other hand, they can be seen to be participating in 'the political unconscious' by validating support for the East Timorese people, helping stories about the country to continue to circulate, at the same time as they attempt to underwrite positive roles for Australians in East Timor as implicit compensation for the dirty history of official Australian interference in the efforts of the East Timorese people to gain independence, justice and recognition over more than a quarter of a century.

## Bibliography

- Abernethy, Mark 2009, *Double Back*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.
- Answered by Fire* 2006, Dir. Jessica Hobbs, Australia-Canada, Prod. [Beyond Simpson le Mesurier](#), Muse Entertainment Enterprises, [Terra Rossa Pictures](#), [Powercorp](#), TV Miniseries.
- Bell, Anita 2001, *Crystal Coffin*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point.
- Callahan, David 2010, 'History and Shame: East Timor in Australian Fictions', *Interventions* 12(3): 401-14.
- 2012a, 'Re-visiting East Timor as Fiction and as Memoir: The Work of Tony Maniaty', *Literature & History*, 21(2): 66-77.
- 2012b, 'Failing to meet in the middle: East Timor and Gail Jones's 'Other Places'', *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australasian Studies*, 26(2): 137-42.
- Clendinnen, Inga 2006, *The History Question: Who Owns the Past?* Quarterly Essay 23, BlackInc, Melbourne.
- Cardoso, Luís 2013, *O Ano em que Pigafetta Completou a Circum-Navegação* [The year in which Pigafetta completed the Circum-Navigation], Porto, Sextante.
- Curthoys, Ann & John Docker 2006, *Is History Fiction?*, University of NSW Press, Sydney.
- Dickstein, Morris 2006, 'The Politics of the Thriller: On *Munich* and Moral Ambiguity', *Dissent*, 53(2): 89-92.
- Fernandes, Clinton 2004, *Reluctant Saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor*, Scribe, Melbourne.

- Gleeson, Libby 1998, *Refuge*, Puffin/Penguin Australia, Ringwood.
- Green, Bill 1993, *Cleaning Up*, NSW, Sceptre, Rydalmere.
- Grenville, Kate 2005, Interview with Ramona Koval, *Books and Writing*, ABC Radio National, 17 July.
- Horne, Steven 2010, *The Devil's Tears*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney.
- Jones, Gail 1992, 'Other Places', *The House of Breathing*, Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press: 28-51.
- Maniaty, Tony 1984, *The Children Must Dance*, Penguin Australia, Ringwood.
- Mayer, Ruth 2007, 'Virus Discourse: The Rhetoric of Threat and Terrorism in the Biothriller', *Cultural Critique*, 66 (Spring): 1-20.
- Mendes, Pedro Rosa 2010, *Peregrinação de Enmanuel Jhesus* [Pilgrimage of Enmanuel Jhesus], Dom Quixote, Lisbon.
- Mo, Timothy 1991, *The Redundancy of Courage*, Chatto & Windus, London.
- Phelan, James 2006, *Fox Hunt*, Hodder Australia, Sydney.
- Taudevin, Lansell 1999, *East Timor: Too Little, Too Late*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney.