

**Annette Stewart. *Barbara Hanrahan: A Biography*. Kent Town (S.A.): Wakefield Press, 2010, 303pp.
AUS\$39.95
ISBN 978 1 86254 824 4 (pbk.)
<http://www.wakefieldpress.com.au>**

Annette Stewart's careful and sympathetic biography of the respected Australian printmaker and author, Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991), vividly illuminates the relationship between its subject's conflicted life and her confronting and often disturbing body of work. A compelling and sometimes harrowing narrative, it locates the sources of Hanrahan's artistic obsession with the split self, traumatic sexual experience, and the yearning for a paradisaical world, in her working-class Adelaide childhood and youth. Key influences on Hanrahan's creative vision include the loss of her father (an 'incurable wound') when she was an infant and the disruption to her safe, cosy life as the focus of a nurturing all-female household (of grandmother, mother and Downs-syndrome great aunt—'the three who were important') when her mother re-partnered in Barbara's late teens. Also important was her early loss of sexual innocence. This appears to have been associated with experiences as a child of sexual molestation and harassment (24, 65), her early exposure to lurid domestic lore about woman's sorry biological and social lot (11,17) and her own hormonal difficulties which may be implicated in her recurrent 'fits'—severe emotional storms or tantrums (38). These specifically 'female' formative experiences, probably not uncommon in mid-20th century Australia, arguably contributed to the unsatisfactory heterosexual relationships of Hanrahan's early adult life. They find grotesque expression in many of her more shocking prints featuring woman as a reproductive being, several of which are presented in the text, and in many episodes in her literary work. Paralleling Hanrahan's hostile feelings towards sex and men was an early awareness of parochial, snobbish Adelaide's 'dark' or 'sinister' aspect (15-19). Hanrahan was an 'unusually reflective, observant child prone to fantasy' (26) and, as she matured, her rejection of class discrimination and social conformity fuelled her sense of being divided: 'One self seemed conventional enough, but was in fact presenting the world with a false social front, while the other was a wild, free, true one, a spirit self at odds with the "normal" world' (28). Her early prints convey this split: 'The female figures she depicts belong to two entirely different realms. One set appear decoratively attired, passively arranged in a tamed garden with pretty trees, foliate tendrils and gently bounding creatures like hares. The other space is wilder and free of barriers between animals and humans. Girls may ride roosters or cats; dogs of darkness howl and bare their teeth. But the second world is more joyous than the first ...' (36-7).

Stewart firmly establishes these recurrent, indeed repetitive (82) themes in the opening chapters of her study, showing their lifelong significance throughout Hanrahan's career. Remarkably, despite her fractured inner life, Hanrahan managed single-mindedly to pursue a creative destiny, undertaking separate studies in art and first year English in addition to her three year Art Teaching course at Adelaide Teachers' College (was she a scholarship-holder?) and in 1963 travelling to England to further her ambitions and to escape from a home in which she had felt increasingly alien. Her early models included Chagall (33, 36),

Van Gogh (38) and Blake (39) and, after a traumatising abortion in 1968, Janet Frame (56, 94). She thereafter identified with, and in varying ways sought to emulate, writers and artists who had dedicated themselves to their art while struggling against ill health, mental distress and/or social alienation: D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Denton Welch, Frida Kahlo, Carson McCullers, Hart Crane, Eudora Welty, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, William Faulkner were influential at different stages of her development. As was the case with many tormented artists before her, the madness that Hanrahan acknowledged in herself as a threat 'was thus avoided thanks to the sanity of creation' (39). Her life in Stewart's telling narrative emerges as a long and courageous battle against the psychic fragmentation of mental illness and, in her final decade, the depredations of cancer.

Hanrahan's capacity to continue working creatively was underpinned by the relationship she established in England in the late 1960s with fellow Adelaide expatriate Jo Steele, an engineer and sculptor who shared her anti-social feelings and desire to withdraw from the world: '[i]n their intensity and like-mindedness they drew together' (61). Unerringly, Hanrahan had hit upon the very partner who could recreate the nurturing environment of her childhood. Steele supported her financially so that she did not have to work as a teacher and freed her from mundane domestic tasks. With him she could 'pursue her life as an artist without criticism' (68). Although she would never achieve enduring mental stability the relationship with Steele contained her mood swings and defrayed the emotional cost of her debilitating anxiety and depression. With Steele she was also able to embark upon a quasi-religious quest for spiritual fulfilment that encompassed utter commitment to a creative destiny. As a couple they were, moreover, sufficiently financially comfortable to travel freely, to relocate their household in inspiring settings (e.g. Zennor in Cornwall, in emulation of D.H. Lawrence's utopian adventure there) and to make pilgrimages to the sites 'sacred' to Hanrahan's literary and artistic 'saints'. With Steele's blessing Hanrahan could visit and even work in Australia until returning permanently in 1981. The chapters that follow Hanrahan and Steele to such places as Mexico, Haworth, New Mexico and other places in the United States are especially engaging perhaps because Hanrahan emerges here in long shots against actual landscapes, as it were, rather than through big close-ups of her interior life.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s Hanrahan built up considerable success as a printmaker in England and also internationally. I would have liked more detail about this phase of her artistic development and wonder here, and also occasionally elsewhere, whether Stewart felt under constraint when investigating or reporting the more 'public' dimensions of Hanrahan's life. (The fact that Hanrahan was briefly president of the South Australian Graphic Art Society as well as apparently performing well as a teacher indicates considerable ambition and a professional, social and perhaps even 'political' competence worthy of further discussion.) The chapters that chart her career as a writer are more instructive, throwing light on her preoccupations, unusual literary working methods and sources of inspiration, including dreams and hallucinations. Hanrahan could only work 'frantically', often on several manuscripts at the one time; she often took down verbatim the reportage of the actual people she transformed into her fictional characters; and when in an intense writing mood, 'imagination completely took her over and she no longer consciously kept her fantasy and the

real world separate—on the contrary, she wished her fantasy to become reality. She could then write freely about it, without any sense of strain’ (114). An intermittent diarist since childhood, the habit of recording became compulsive from 1967 onwards and, after the death of her beloved Nan in 1968, she began seriously writing fiction that drew on her early memories. Her first novel, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973) won enthusiastic reviews in Britain, launching a reputation there that waned thereafter (much to Hanrahan’s distress) while it steadily grew in Australia. A second autobiographical work (*Sea Green*, 1980), less well received in Britain, was succeeded by a series of opulent gothic fantasies successfully promoted by the young and energetic editorial staff at University of Queensland Press: *The Albatross Muff* (1977), *Where the Queens All Strayed* (1978), *The Peach Groves* (1979), *The Frangipani Gardens* (1980) and *Dove* (1982). *Kewpie Doll* (1982), and *Michael and Me and the Sun*, (1994) signalled shifts back to the autobiographical mode while *Annie Magdalene* (1985), *Chelsea Girl* (1988), *Flawless Jade* (1989) and *Goodnight Mr Moon* (1992) turn in innovative ways to the imagined lives of ‘ordinary, unmemorable women’, a project which broke new ground in Australian writing (202). Throughout Stewart’s chronicling of Hanrahan’s career, the split or divided or doubled self unifies the discussion and throws light on the characteristic strategies at various points in her pictorial and literary production: the ‘faux-naïve child narrators’ (217), the seduction and corruption of ‘unwitting goodness’ (145), the repeated ‘pairing pattern’ (140) of doubled or opposed characters, and such overcrowded foregrounds that, as in her prints, ‘almost all conventional background is occluded’ (259): ‘[t]here seems to be no background at all, only foreground, with objects, people, details all crowding in on you’ (122). Stewart also argues convincingly that a ‘dreamlike quality connects [Hanrahan’s] short stories [in *Dream People* (1987)] with the fantasy novels of her earlier career, once again making it relatively meaningless to divide her work into rigid periods. There is always ... a continuity that transcends chronology, a return to origins that is endlessly repetitive, and was only to be exhausted with Barbara’s death’ (223).

In exploring the visionary landscape of Hanrahan’s disturbed psyche Stewart refuses to pathologise modes of behaviour and artistic expression that might otherwise draw distracting psychiatric labels, preferring to suggest a range of possible approaches to understanding Hanrahan’s ‘strangeness’ (28-9). She also refuses to slot these modes of behaviour and expression into convenient socio-cultural pigeonholes (e.g. ‘feminist’) while at the same time emphasising usefully their relevance to Hanrahan’s generation, especially her female contemporaries (she was, after all, born in the same year as Germaine Greer). Instead, Stewart’s approach is Wordsworthian, tracing the growth of an artist’s mind. Whereas in her critical study of Hanrahan’s work, *Woman and Herself* (1998), Stewart deployed psychoanalytic models to appreciate Hanrahan’s *modus operandi*, now as Hanrahan’s biographer, she writes as a humanist. Her narrative method is conventionally chronological without sacrificing the frequent recapitulation and foreshadowing that is so crucial to understanding Hanrahan’s artistic ‘repetition compulsion’. Stewart’s prose is fluent and interesting, although a sharper editorial eye could have eliminated some minor infelicities (overuse of ‘largely’, repetition of words within sentences, and a puzzling discrepancy between the references in the text to the print on the back cover (*Puppet Master*) and the actual print (deliberately obscured) that appears there (*Snake*).

All biographers are constrained by the nature of the evidence available to them. In charting the inner life of someone as apparently reclusive as Hanrahan, Stewart necessarily relies heavily—indeed almost exclusively—on Hanrahan’s own writings: her diaries and novels and, to a lesser extent, her correspondence. There are dangers in such reliance on the subject’s version of events especially in the case of one who confused instinctively fantasy and reality. Stewart quietly and sensitively acknowledges these dangers (3, 7, 77) and from time to time offers alternative perspectives to elaborate or to challenge Hanrahan’s account of herself (e.g. 13, 24, 28). Unanswered questions nevertheless remain. Most of these relate to the social and economic circumstances of Hanrahan’s early life and the details of her printmaking career. (One issue that particularly puzzled me concerns Hanrahan’s paternal “grandfather Collins” (23-4). Why does he have a different surname from that of his deceased son (Barbara’s father), Bob Hanrahan?) If aspects of Stewart’s handling of her material are sometimes unclear they lend intrigue rather than detract from what is a gripping and convincing portrait of a significant Australian writer and artist.

Fran de Groen, Sydney