

University of New England

Jeremy Fisher

No end to the way: using G.M. Glaskin's life and works in creative writing teaching

Abstract:

G.M. Glaskin (1923-2000) was a prominent Australian writer of the 1950s and 1960s who won the Commonwealth Literary Prize for literature in 1955, but who has slipped from critical attention since. In large part this is because he was a prolific writer across many genres (fantasy, popular fiction, writing for children, and memoir) and forms (novel, short stories, plays and screenplays), thus making his output difficult to categorise. He also wrote a book that is not only a landmark in the rare use of sustained second person narrative voice but also perhaps Australia's first openly gay novel. This combination of style and shock was representative of the writer as well as the man. Although he began writing in Perth, encouraged by the city's literary elite (Mary Durack, John K. Ewers and Henrietta Drake-Brockman), his works were received more favourably internationally than in Australia and he lived mostly overseas, in Asia and later the Netherlands, until 1968, when he returned permanently to Perth. There is some evidence that suggests Glaskin may have been encouraged to stay away because of his sexuality. Although only *No end to the way* is overtly homosexual, homoeroticism features in a number of his short stories. His work was influenced significantly by his time in Asia and his books set there embrace cultural differences as well as push boundaries on sexual matters. Most of his books were published in the United Kingdom and in European language translations and this enabled Glaskin to live on the proceeds of his writing from 1959. This paper provides a history of the reception of his work through contemporary reviews and summaries of his major works. Reading Glaskin's work can offer many opportunities for writing students to appreciate and experiment with a variety of techniques, styles and issues. Combined with a study of Glaskin's life, students will learn as well about personalities and creativity in Australian literature in the period, particularly in Western Australia, and some understanding of what life was like for homosexual men of this period. Two works, the second person narrative novel *No end to the way* (1965) and the novella *The eaves of night* (1965), which uses transcripts of tapes and memoir, are examined here in detail since they provide a starting point for renewed examination of Glaskin's works and also for creative writing exercises.

Biographical note:

Jeremy Fisher is Senior Lecturer in Writing at the University of New England. This work was kindly supported by a grant from the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Creative Industries Development Fund.

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‘To me, how a writer lives is the crucial point of understanding why and what a writer writes,’ Leo van de Pas wrote in *Overland*, in defence of his long-term friend Gerry Glaskin (Van de Pas, 2004a: 76). For a writer like Glaskin, the life lived is central to the production of his works.

Gerald Markus Glaskin was born in Perth Western Australia on 16 December, 1923, and died there on 11 March, 2000. In between, he travelled the world and wrote a profusion of works in all manner of genres. Today he is primarily remembered for the groundbreaking gay novel *No end to the way* (published in 1965 using the pseudonym Neville Jackson; Fisher, 2004; Fisher, 2005), which is not only one of the first openly gay Australian novels but is also written in sustained second person narrative. However, much of his writing was closely related to events in his life and in one late novella, ‘The eaves of night’, he combines taped transcripts and memoir to offer an insight both into himself and his grandmother.

As he records in *One way to wonderland* (1984), as well as other writings, Glaskin was the eldest of seven children, with a gap of some years between him and the younger ones. His family lived in Cottesloe, then an outer Perth suburb. His parents were never rich, but, thanks to a scholarship, Glaskin attended the selective Perth Modern School. He left at fifteen years of age to start work as a trainee accountant and help earn additional income for his family. In 1941, when he was seventeen, he joined the Royal Australian Navy. While he aspired to the Air Force, it did not take recruits until they were eighteen. In May 1942 he was injured in the course of his duties and, after treatment at a military hospital, invalided out of the Navy. It was in hospital that he began his writing career. Although he could not use his arms, he dictated stories to another patient who could not walk. In 1943 he joined the Air Force and was sent to Canada for aircrew training, which he completed at the end of 1944, by which time he had been commissioned as Flying Officer. As the war in Europe was winding down, he was sent back to Australia where he saw out duty until the end of the war against Japan. Demobilised, he worked in a sports shop and as a sales statistician for Ford (Hetherington, 1962), but he dreamed of being a writer.

Glaskin has recorded how the West Australian author J. K. (Keith) Ewers, whom his mother had met during the war when Ewers acted as an air-raid warden, encouraged him to write. Their friendship lasted many years, but there is conflicting evidence regarding Ewers’ role in Glaskin’s development as a writer. According to Glaskin (1978), Ewers urged him to write while he was still young, so he wrote his first book at his ‘grandmother’s house at Safety Bay’ in 1948, taking six months off work and living on his deferred RAAF pay of £250. This manuscript ‘shared the judges’ commendation after the prizewinners in the Commonwealth Jubilee literary competition (novel section) in 1951’ (*Southerly*, 1957). Ewers’ own book, *With the sun on my back* (1953), was second prizewinner in this competition in the non-fiction category; D’Arcy Niland’s *The big smoke* (1959) was in second place for novel, and the first place novel winner was another West Australian book, Tom Matthew Ronan’s *Vision splendid* (1954). Ewers encouraged Glaskin to expand his horizons (or perhaps it was a case of the old man telling the young gun to ‘get out of town’), so Gerry took up a position first as a car salesman (Hetherington, 1962) then as a ‘banking exchange and stock broker’ in Singapore for the next ten years (Glaskin, 1978). He was perhaps wise to live away from the confines of Perth, but was Ewers also aware of aspects of Glaskin’s life that could cause problems in Perth? The issue

of Glaskin's sexuality and sexual activities remains unknown and unstated at this point, but whenever Glaskin returned to Perth he seemed always to leave with some haste.

That first book, *A world of our own*, 'a long novel, set in Western Australia, about a handful of returned soldiers during the first weeks of their demobilization' (*Times literary supplement*, 1955), was finally published in London in 1955. It won the Commonwealth Literary Prize. Ewers reviewed it in *The west Australian*. He presented the review copy to Glaskin's mother before her son had an opportunity to give her a copy. Ewers wrote later: 'In spite of a certain exuberance of words and of situations, this first novel introduced a writer with an ability to create characters and to weave a closely integrated plot behind a superficially loose construction' (Ewers, 1962). Faint praise, but more positive than the 1957 review in *Southerly*: 'overpraised ... He lacks almost all the qualities of the novelist ... he has no natural gift ... His characters don't live or grow ... One hopes Mr Glaskin will seek, and find his right field, for his is not a book to dismiss too lightly. But it seems as though his talents do not lie in the direction of the novel' (HH & JL, 1957). That's vicious criticism, suggesting some personal animosity. Relationships between writers are ever fraught, and never more so in small communities, as Perth was in the 1950s. Ewers was a prominent figure there, of influence in student publications such as *The Winthrop review* (edited by Harry Heseltine: is this the HH?) as well as in the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Despite this criticism, the book sold 12,000 copies in hardback, though mostly overseas (Hetherington, 1962).

Glaskin wrote that Ewers continued to encourage him to return to Singapore. 'By going,' Glaskin wrote, 'I missed a Commonwealth Literary Fellowship [awarded in 1957] of £1000, but I had five more years in Singapore and wrote two more books' (Glaskin, 1978). Leo van de Pas offers a different view, suggesting that Ewers, influential in arts bureaucracy circles, argued that the funds be withheld from Glaskin since he lived overseas (Van de Pas, 2004b). Glaskin wrote the previous words in an obituary for Ewers in which he is effusive in his praise of the man's support for his writing and van de Pas records that Glaskin remained good friend with Ewers' wife, Jean (Van de Pas, 2004a), but was Glaskin being ironic in recording his appreciation of his 'mentor'? Or was there something else, something Ewers knew about Glaskin, that was better kept away from Perth?

These are questions raised by his work and its reception. Marjorie Barnard was far kinder to him in *Meanjin*. Though she calls *A world of our own* 'unripe, a green and woody fruit', 'it is not to say that [the novel] is without promise or makes uninteresting reading. There are no faults that time could not cure in later work' (Barnard, 1956). One of Glaskin's earliest works, 'Uncle Tom's funeral', was published in the *Coast to coast 1946* anthology edited by Barnard and Flora Eldershaw (as M. Barnard Eldershaw), so she was not unfamiliar with his work. The *Times literary supplement* (1955) also noted that the 'book, in spite of its violent see-sawing between gentility and crudity, is none the less readable', establishing a tradition of Glaskin's work being better received overseas than in Australia.

The two other works Glaskin published while he was living in Singapore were *A minor portrait* (1957) and the fantasy *A change of mind* (1959). *A minor portrait* is set in Perth and is the story of a boy coming of age, though it stretches the bounds of probability. The boy is seduced by a French countess who is not only suspected of killing her third

husband, Mr Glubb, but who also paints the young protagonist nude. The book sold 6,000 copies in hardback and 75,000 in a paperback edition retitled *The mistress* (Hetherington, 1962).

In 1959 he left his position with Singapore stockbrokers Lyle & Evatt, where he was a partner, to write full time (van Langenberg, 2001). He set up home in Amsterdam in 1961. Why not Perth? John Burbidge records that Glaskin fell foul of the law there in 1961 when he was charged with having ‘willfully and obscenely exposed his person’ on a deserted Perth beach (Burbidge, 2007). This was most likely Swanbourne, which has been known as a nude beach and gay beat since the end of World War II. Had similar incidents occurred earlier? Were they the reason why he turned down a £1000 grant and why Ewers continued to urge him to live overseas? This would fit with attitudes to homosexual behaviour of the time. Homosexuality after all was still illegal.

Leo van de Pas (2004b) has told me that, once he joined Gerry in Perth in 1968 as his lover, he and Glaskin lived very quiet lives together, not going out to nightclubs, even living in separate but adjoining flats. But in Singapore and later in Amsterdam Glaskin lived a much more open life. Leo said: ‘In Singapore for instance, he’d been out with his friend Harold waterskiing. They were all tired and Gerry suggested they go to the Tanglin Club to relax. Harold says ‘I can’t go’. Gerry says, ‘Why not?’ Harold says, ‘I’m Chinese.’ Gerry says, ‘Oh so you are.’ Anyway, long before, in Canada he was engaged to a girl and it all fell through because she found out he wasn’t going to stay in Canada and she didn’t want to move to Australia. Gerry had a very strange relationship with women. He was always so open, so familiar. I know of four husbands who were, jealous isn’t the right word—‘concerned’. He said when he was young he fell in love with girls and in lust with boys. In his early years, Gerry was going both ways, but from Singapore onwards it was pretty much men only.’

Glaskin’s first Asian inspired novel, *A lion in the sun*, was published in 1960, followed by *The beach of passionate love: Pantai cinta berahi* in 1961. These works show him open to Asian culture, writing freely about matters sexual and maintaining a style closer to popular, even pulp, fiction than to more literary forms. *A lion in the sun* is narrated by Geoffrey M. Graham (GMG). When first offered to the publisher, the narrator was titled Gerry M. Glaskin, but the publisher Barrie & Rockliff would not support a literary device now quite common in fiction and ‘could not cope with the blatant autobiographical, naïve, unsophisticated, know-all Australian persona in what purported to be a novel set in an exotic location’ (Van Langenburg, 2003).

Sylvia Marchant reviewed *A lion in the sun* when it was reissued by a Singapore publisher in 1995. While she thought the book’s depiction of ‘the busy multicultural life of Singapore in the ‘60s’ gave ‘the book some substance and clarity’, she felt that the first person narrator was ‘possessed of questionable standards, for the love of his life is obviously our hero’ (Marchant, 1995). Geoffrey Graham meets Bradley Chase in a hospital where both are recovering from battle service injuries. This is a reference to Glaskin’s wartime accident and his recovery. Geoff has lost the use of his arms in an accident on board a ship, as actually happened to Glaskin. Chase has been shot in the spine while flying his plane. His legs are paralyzed and he is in a wheelchair. Glaskin writes

about how ‘Geoff’, with no use of his arms, and ‘Brad’, in the wheel chair, managed to organise baths together.

The 1960s works were all published in London. They show little influence from themes then current in Western Australian writing and offered in works contemporary with his such as those of Mary Durack, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, with both of whom he was in contact, or T.A.G Hungerford.

In 1961 on commission from Doubleday in New York, he produced a travel book, *The land that sleeps*. He also wrote a children’s book, *A waltz through the hills* (which was translated into Danish, as well as made into a film in 1989), for his publisher Barrie & Rockliff. The book has two illustrations by Paul Rigby. It is a third person narrative about a girl, Sammy, and her brother Andy (or Drew). After their mother dies they decide to walk to Perth to avoid being split up and sent to separate homes. They are assisted by the Aboriginal Frank as they go through a number of trials such as bushfire but they are eventually found.

With full-time writing, Glaskin’s output increased. He’d already published numerous short stories and these were collected in *A small selection of short stories* in 1962. This work includes ‘Uncle Tom’s funeral’ and carries a dedication to Henrietta Drake-Brockman, who’d used an extract from *A world of our own* in a 1959 anthology (Drake-Brockman, 1959). The dedication reads to Henrietta, ‘who, after reading my first attempt at a short story when I was only fourteen, said: “Gerry, when I was fourteen I wrote a wonderful short story about Venice. You’ve chosen South America—” And now both of us write about the places we know.’ The stories are conventional enough, and rely ‘heavily on established formulas of romance, murder, suspense and horror’ (Torre, 2009), but they are adventurous in their use of point of view. ‘Boy at play’ has a child witness a murder, and then he is convinced by adults he didn’t see it. ‘Sometimes it wasn’t so nice’ has a homoerotic undercurrent; Joe, a sick bay attendant on a sinking ship, has to leave his friend Andy to drown as Joe obeys orders from the Medical Officer. The same is also true of ‘Last night ashore’ where two sailors, Max and Bennie, go ashore ostensibly to see a play. Bennie, a large man, drinks too much in a pub and bashes up Max, then tenderly carries him back on board their ship, pledging never to do it again. ‘Archie’, first published in the *Australian women’s weekly*, looks at suicide, recounting the story of a troubled, sensitive man and ending with him joking with the narrator about sticking his head in the oven: ‘But that, poor devil, is just exactly what he did’.

In 1963, he published *Flight to landfall*, a war story with a Singapore/Indonesian setting. It is 448 pages long and dedicated to Mary Durack and Edgar Vos, thus recognising both Western Australia and Amsterdam, where Glaskin was living and wrote the book. It is set in North West Australia and involves the narrator, who is a novelist, being asked by friends high in the Western Australian government, to check out a scheme involving diamonds and a Dutch family from Indonesia named the Van Doorens while he is ‘wintering’ in Broome.

O love, o loneliness followed in 1964. It consists of two novellas that were intended to be part of a trilogy. ‘O love’ is written in first person. It is set in Perth where Ralph, the narrator and a lawyer, goes into the Coffee Cup, where he’s picked up girls before. It’s late at night, ‘the same old crowd’, three ‘wary-eyed’ homosexuals, two middle-aged couples

fresh out of the theatre, a Greek pimp and a young girl 'at least seventeen'. Ralph admires her body and she asks him for a light. They end up in bed, he pays her double and finds himself obsessed with her. She is Connie, and her exclamation 'O love' is a constant repetition in the text. 'O loneliness' is a Gothic work, its setting a weird, castle-like building somewhere on the Perth coast. The first person narrator is Geoffrey, a novelist, who is proposing to lease the castle from the painter mother and pianist son who occupy it. He's been taken there by the family's lawyer whom the mother calls 'Daddy-Ben'. Her son Robert is in a homosexual relationship with Nick, the Greek 'help'. But, true to the Gothic setting, it is incest which is the major theme of this work. Jean Durban reviewed the book favourably in the *Australian book review*, preferring 'O Loneliness' over 'O Love'. She felt it was 'the sort of book which you put down with the feeling that you have read something and would like to read more' (Durban, 1964-65).

The final part of the trilogy emerged in 1965's *No end of the way*, where Glaskin demonstrates tremendous discipline in maintaining a sustained second person narrative voice. This book was published under the pseudonym Neville Jackson, Barrie & Rockliff insisting on this to protect Glaskin's reputation. Ironically, it was his most successful work, being published in a number of editions over the years. It was also briefly banned in Australia because of its open depiction of homosexuality. The same year he published *The man who didn't count* under his own name. This is a dark spy thriller.

The road to nowhere, a collection of short stories, was published in 1967. The formidable Nancy Keesing reviewed the book in the *Bulletin* and noted that while 'Glaskin writes well, organizes material well, and very well understands children and young adults ... his tales lack something – warmth and true compassion, I think' (Keesing, 1967). *A bird in my hands* was also published in 1967. Again it is dedicated to Edgar Vos, and set in Amsterdam. It is memoir. Glaskin lives in a flat directly above that of his friend Edgar Vos. The flats are in a typical steeply stepped, narrow Amsterdam house. He buys Vos two canaries. These became his companions when he falls ill with jaundice, or hepatitis. The book documents his suffering in considerable detail, but it is a slight work overall.

Glaskin returned to Australia in 1967, but his health was impaired further after a surfing accident caused damage to his spine. But he continued to write. A dramatic version of his story 'Turn on the heat' was produced at the Hole in the Wall Theatre in Perth that year. He was also now living with van de Pas, who joined him in 1968 after they'd met in a gay bar in Amsterdam. Glaskin had asked van de Pas to come to Perth within 24 hours of their meeting (van de Pas, 2004b). The two worked together. Glaskin referred to van de Pas as his assistant in correspondence and in publications (Glaskin, 1975; Glaskin, 1984).

The work *Two women* was published in 1975 and is one of Glaskin's later publications, with only a few poems and *One way to wonderland* ahead of him in printed form, though he continued to write and submit work for publication. While *Two women* is described as two novellas, the second work in it, 'The eaves of night', pushes the boundaries of fiction, combining transcripts of taped interviews with Glaskin's grandmother with reminiscences and digression. Glaskin the writer intervenes in the text, offering a different point of view or expounding further on a point made by the grandmother. The story also features genealogical trees compiled by van de Pas, who had also transcribed the tapes. Though the work bears only Gerry's name, it is in effect a collaboration.

It is also a thoroughly modern piece, showing Glaskin continuing to challenge convention and play around with form, structure and narrative voice. That it is described as a novella is indicative too of Glaskin's blurring of conventions of what is fiction and what is non-fiction. Both this work and *No end to the way* are worthy for study and emulation by students of writing as both show a writer at the height of his powers exploring, expanding and inventing.

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