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Out and proud: the difficult emergence of overt homosexual narrative in Australian fiction

Abstract:

Overt male homosexual narrative evolved over a century, first through characterisation and then through point of view, though this slow evolution was constrained by legal, social and ethical problems. It would take most of the twentieth century before a homosexual was seen to be an insider, that is, that there were literary works with an overt homosexual point of view. This paper examines the emergence of overt male homosexual narrative in Australian fiction and explores the ethical, legal and social dimensions of moving such narrative from outside to inside.

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Homosexuality and the law

In Australia, male homosexuality was illegal forty years ago. South Australia first decriminalised sexual activity between males in 1972; it remained illegal in New South Wales until 1984 and in Tasmania until 1997 (Bull et al., 1991; Croome, 2006).

Today, homosexuality remains illegal in many countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In English-speaking cultures, considerable social approbation still attends open depiction of homosexual activity. This has limited critical analysis of homosexual writing. Hurley (1996) noted that such writing “receives only patchy critical attention”. For him, Robert Dessaix’s introduction to his anthology of Australian gay and lesbian writing (Dessaix, 1993) was “the most extensive documentation ... so far” (Hurley, 1996, p. 22). The recent *Cambridge history of Australian literature* (Pierce, 2009) fails to redress this situation.

This study documents and provides a context for the evolution of overt male homosexual narration in Australian literature over the past century.

Censorship and repression of homosexual stories

From 1788, restrictive legislation governed the publishing and importation of “obscene” material. Homosexuality fell within this definition. For local publications a “superabundance of censorship laws” (Heath, 2001) restricted the distribution even of medical textbooks. For works published overseas, Customs Acts and Police Offences Acts restricted importation. A Book Censorship Advisory Committee was established in 1933 (Heath, 2001).

While English Law maintained a definition of obscenity as anything that had the tendency to ‘deprave or corrupt’ and permitted consideration of the context of a work, in Australia the term included a variety of perceived threats to both the individual and the state and context was ruled irrelevant (Heath, 2001). Works banned included Gore Vidal’s *City and the pillar* (1948) and James Baldwin’s *Another country* (1962) (Bullock & Moore, 2010).

Events brought about some change. In 1957, J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) was banned, though it was freely available. The US Ambassador had even donated copies to various libraries. The resulting flap forced an overturn of the ban and a review of censorship mechanisms reducing the list of banned books from 16,000 to 178 (Glover, 2006; Bullock & Moore, 2010).

Legal challenges to the obscenity laws also reduced the powers of censors. D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) remained banned in Australia even after publication was approved in the United Kingdom in 1960. Penguin brought out a local edition in 1966. When this local publication was challenged, the case failed in court. Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) was eventually approved for sale in Australia on the basis of literary merit (Zifcak, 2006).

Change was slowly occurring in other areas. In the United Kingdom, the 1957 Wolfenden Report led to decriminalisation of homosexuality. In the United States movements for racial equality broadened into calls for social change, equality between the sexes and sexual freedom.

In New York in June 1969, homosexuals in the Stonewall bar fought back against police victimisation. An Australian “gay movement” developed (Altman, 1973), the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) forming in July 1970, and Gay Liberation in July 1971. A predominantly male gay subculture evolved quickly. In 1979, Tim Carrigan and John Lee wrote:

Ten years ago it would have been difficult indeed to predict that male homosexuals would come to have the commercial significance that they have today in most advanced capitalist societies.

The emergence of homosexual narrative

Homosexuals were identifying themselves with their subjects and themes—a ‘self-identification’ that is not applicable to more visible minorities. The combination of a relaxation of censorship and a willingness of homosexuals to identify themselves provided the basis for viable homosexual narratives.

Overt homosexual narrative had been slowly evolving. Stephen Kirby noted “Nabokov claimed that the first homosexuals in modern fiction were a pair of degenerate lovers in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*” (Kirby, 1987). In Australian literature, Henry Handel Richardson’s “hysterical, easily over excited” character Krafft in *Maurice Guest* (1908) is perhaps the first (Kirby, 1987).

Kenneth ‘Seaforth’ Mackenzie’s Australian book *The young desire it* (1937), first published in the United Kingdom and featuring a schoolteacher sexually interested in a schoolboy, offered “an intensely introspective account of a boy’s experience of love, both homosexual and heterosexual” (Wilde et al, 1987). While Garry Wotherspoon (1991) says “[i]ts sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality is remarkable even today”, readers still required some knowledge of an otherwise unmentioned and unknown parallel world.

Wotherspoon (2007) has also recounted how Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and Kylie Tennant’s *Tell Morning This* (1967) and other titles provide knowledge of camp subcultures. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Michael Baguenault half-crazedly roams over the Eastern Suburbs towards the Gap, from where he is to throw himself into the sea. He encounters a young man whose “small hands were manicured, . . . his hairless face, with oval cheeks, was pink and powdered. His eyes, large and timid, looked appealingly at Michael” (Stead, 1934, p. 277). Jon Rose’s *At the Cross* (1961) comes close to having an overt homosexual narrator and narration. However, while Jon’s heterosexual dalliances are documented, there are other lovers, probably males, where the story stops with an ellipsis.

Wotherspoon also mentions Stuart Lauder’s *Wingers landfall* (1962) which details steward Harry Shears’ attempt to discover why his half-brother Danny, with whom he was in unrequited love, fell overboard from the liner *Cyclamen*. Harry and the bellboy Prince conduct a relationship as Harry investigates the mysterious Bernard and Bernard’s hold over a group of bellboys of which Danny was once part. In Colombo he finds Bernard is part of a Buddhist-Christian religious order, though this involves the boys bathing naked. On board ship, Bernard reveals that Danny spoke in voices about “his brother”. The book ends with Harry having knocked out, possibly killed

Bernard, and the police arresting him on Prince's information. He goes into an epileptic shock, which Danny suffered on the ship and made him jump overboard. The book's conclusion suggests it may have been rewritten to provide the appropriate tragic ending. Before 1967, the British Home Office required such endings in order to discourage illegal behaviour.

Tragic endings were not for G.M. Glaskin (writing as Neville Jackson) in his work *No end to the way* (1965). Hurley (1996, p. 190) states that it is "the first Australian novel narrated from an openly male homosexual point of view."

The one thing that links *The young desire it*, *Winger's landfall* and *No end to the way* is a male-centric, amoral point of view. Penworth, the teacher in *The young desire it*, desires the boy Charles, but shows little concern for the boy's feelings. In *Winger's landfall*, Harry craves his half-brother and uses the boy Prince. Ray in *No end to the way* despises effeminate types. He attempts to dominate his lover Cor. All three protagonists are judgemental and sure of a maleness dominant over women, boys and weaker men, which for at least two of the protagonists includes open homosexuals.

Even though Jon's sexuality in *At the Cross* is equivocal, the character is less hidebound by its maleness. However, all these works were being published as legal and social attitudes to homosexuality were beginning to change, and as homosexuals began to out themselves. This was the context in which Frank Moorhouse wrote about homosexual experience. *The Americans, baby* (1972) features a sexual affair between the American, Paul Jonson, and Carl, a young university student. Neither Jonson nor Carl consider themselves homosexual: "we have affinity – it happens to people sometimes", Jonson tells Carl (p. 18). Nevertheless, Jonson and Carl are two minor characters within an otherwise heterosexual cosmos. While there was literary space for portrayals of homosexuality, there was still an assumption in these books, even *No end to the way*, that readers were primarily heterosexual.

However, for gay readers, the ability to read stories that speak directly to them is an empowering process (Fisher, 2004). In the early 1970s homosexuals found the confidence to name themselves. With this confidence, they began to tell their own stories. Overtly homosexual writers were writing overtly homosexual texts. These are the books that I examine here. I follow in the tradition of Gregory Woods (1998) who defined such writing as "Literature about being gay, by men who identify themselves as gay" (p. 10).

Post liberation homosexual narrative

Dennis Altman (1998) suggests that "to make sense of the lived reality of shifting and multiple identities we need turn to creative visions, and remember, as Doris Lessing wrote, 'There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth'". To that end, the first homosexual anthology in Australia, *Edge city on two different plans* (Dunne et al, 1983), was published in 1983 and reviewed in *Meanjin* under the heading "invisible people" (Roberts, 1983). Other works soon followed.

Gary Dunne's *If blood should stain the lino* (1983) is an overt homosexual narrative. Dunne's character Simon Byrne visits sex clubs, works as a dishwasher and otherwise engages in life in the inner-city. Dunne was 29 when the book was published and a

member of a collective of gay writers with a political mission. Dunne's first-person, interconnected short stories aim both to record and recount.

The Beat (Payne, 1985), set in Melbourne, gives the viewpoint of the various men who were in a toilet block the night a young man, a poofster basher, was killed. Each character is revealed as a different type of gay. Some of them are quite horrible. The aim is to show that there is no one type of homosexual. These men spontaneously attack the basher. Even though they don't all know each other, their conspiracy of silence ensures no-one discovers their involvement in the young man's death.

Sasha Soldatow's *Private - do not open* (1987) like Dunne's work lacks contrivance, but unlike Dunne there is little humour. This is a visceral work, full of death, bodies, and sex. The discontinuous narrative links places and people and illuminates an inner city world of drugs and drink. At times, the text is reflective, examining some of the issues that seemed important in the sexual liberation movements of the 1970s. Despite its claim to be a series of stories about a career of falling in love, *Private - do not open* is rather nihilistic. But *Private - do not open* was a rare homosexual work from a mainstream publisher, then and now.

Hurley (1992) documents the discrimination against homosexuality from the mainstream literary apparatus (criticism, reviewing, journal publishing, festivals) and especially as AIDS took its toll on what was by then identifiably a community. In recent research (Hurley, 2010), Michael Hurley has shown that the number of gay (male homosexual novels) published from 1961 to 1994 never exceeded more than seven in one year (1991), and in many years no such books were published.

Hurley (1996) notes that HIV had an impact on the development of homosexual narrative: "Non-fiction and the visual arts dominate innovative attempts to reorder both the social representations of HIV and AIDS and the way those representations are given narrative shape" (p. 130). Fictional responses to AIDS began to emerge later. Gary Dunne's 1990 poignant collection, *As if overnight* (Dunne, 1990), expresses the shock of life with AIDS. Mel Keegan's thriller *Ice wind and fire* (1990) has the photojournalist narrator, Alex Connor, contributing to a 1985 "story lifting the lid off persecution in the suburbs, the cross gay guys have had to bear with AIDS rearing its ugly head" (p. 10). Two 1991 collections, *Pink ink* (Bashford et al., 1991) and *Travelling on love in a time of uncertainty* (Dunne, 1991), document the uneasy ways in which fiction writers attempted to face the AIDS crisis. In his introduction to *Travelling on love*, Gary Dunne notes: "Contemporary gay fiction also reflects the profound influence, both personal and communal, of our years in the AIDS front-line" (Dunne, 1991, p. 8). These books were published with limited funds by collectives of gay writers who saw it as their mission to bring such works to a public. *Travelling on love* included works by Soldatow and Graeme Aitken.

Mel Keegan's second and third books, *Death's head* (1991) and *Equinox* (1993), saw him beginning to explore science fiction and finding space for homosexual narrative in this genre, further exploring the territory of pulp fiction. The stories can be read as AIDS allegories — war against an unknown, unseen enemy — but it may be that Keegan is simply playing around with genres. His novels now cover the genres of romance, historical fiction, science fiction and thriller.

The 1994 anthology *Fruit* (Dunne, 1994) included works by Christos Tsiolkas and Soldatow, who would go on to produce *Jump cuts: an autobiography* (Soldatow and Tsiolkas, 1996). This rather uneven work bared both their souls.

Nigel Triffitt's *Cheap thrills* (1994) is set in a sex club and a relentless account of perverse sexual practice and amorality. Like *The beat*, it features a range of gay men in a world circumscribed by AIDS. Jake the club attendant sees the evidence of safe sex as he cleans up in the Club: "Another hundred lives saved, another night of praise to the great god survival" (p. 186). As with *The beat*, there is a death in *Cheap thrills*; Fat Lucy dies of a heart attack while being sexually tortured by Skinny Hawthorne, his death "his final lonely triumph, the peak and culmination of a life-long obsession with pain" (p. 183). *Cheap thrills* offers this final vision as a form of redemption.

A similar sensibility is present in a work published the following year, Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded* (1995) and entirely absent from Graeme Aitken's *50 ways of saying fabulous* (1995), but both share an overt first person, homosexual narration. Both books feature young male protagonists; in *Loaded*, the protagonist is Ari, a nineteen-year-old of Greek heritage living out his dislike of his sexuality; in *50 ways of saying fabulous*, the protagonist is Billy-boy, an overweight, effeminate twelve-year-old, who doesn't even recognise his sexuality, though it is very clear to his family and friends. *Loaded* is set in Melbourne; *50 ways* in the south island of New Zealand.

The sureness of voice is possibly due to the age of the authors, both born in the early 1960s, both openly gay men. Both have grown up in a world where their sexuality is at least partially accepted. Neither have any doubts or concerns in writing about their sexuality, though both understand there are limits. Both Aitken and Tsiolkas have connections with Blackwattle Press, established by Laurin Mackinnon and Gary Dunne, which continued to publish gay narratives throughout the 1990s.

In *Loaded*, Ari's friend Joe is uncomfortable with gay clubs and talk of boys, but his other friend Johnno has a drag name, Toula, and camps it up. Ari is also suffering the frustrations of an unemployed teenager living at home in what seems a suffocating family environment. In this book Tsiolkas writes in first person with a deliberate self-consciousness, but the narrative effect is embracing rather than repelling.

From the beginning, Tsiolkas's central character Ari is open about his sexuality. Tsiolkas is unconcerned about any need to justify his character or narrative. His character Ari is happy with his sexuality, but is not at all willing to be forced into a gay lifestyle. Ari rebels at being fitted into a gay mould, and having to live a prescribed lifestyle, labelled as a homosexual.

In *50 ways of saying fabulous*, Billy doesn't know what it means when he is called a poofter by the object of his desire, but he does know it is a bad thing. He wears a cow's tail as an imitation of a girl's pig-tail; his favourite activity is dressing up; his best friend, his cousin Lou, is a butch young girl who prefers doing men's work. Young Billy-boy has sex in the old gaol with Roy, a gawky adolescent with early puberty, but he treats Roy horribly. Aitken leaves Billy-boy just as he is. At the end of the book Billy is still running around with Lou, dressed up and playing fantastic games. It's all alright.

Graeme Aitken chose only writers who identified as gay (or those who were dead and could be assumed to be gay; Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie remains a puzzle) for his 2002 collection *The Penguin book of gay Australian writing*. He was making the point that the writers of these narratives needed to be considered along with the subject matter.

Aitken's own works have continued to be overt homosexual narratives. However, this focus may not have met commercial market expectations. The insularity of the gay world of these narratives is a weakness for mainstream marketing; gay readers have no difficulty with heterosexual narratives, but heterosexual readers have problems with overt homosexual narratives. While Random House published *Vanity fierce* in 1998, the sequel, *The indignities*, was published by the small publishing house Clouds of Magellan in 2010. *Vanity fierce* and *The indignities* both acknowledge and deal with HIV and AIDS. Both are humorous, but more satiric than *50 ways*.

Since both Aitken and Christos Tsiolkas were both first published by Random House in 1995, it's interesting to note that Tsiolkas has moved on to more mainstream and critical success by toning down the overt homosexual narrative in his books, or by using it as a yardstick against which moral excesses can be measured. He has moved on from the limitations of a purely homosexual narrative into a bigger universe. These later books could have avoided any homosexual content, but Tsiolkas stays loyal to his traditions, both Greek and homosexual. In *The Jesus man*, while Tsiolkas doesn't shy away from homosexual narrative, it is incidental. Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005) throws its homosexual narrator into hell, but a hell where depraved homosexual practice is on a higher moral level than anti-semitism. *The slap* (2009) features gay characters, but fundamentally it's a tale of heterosexual suburbia.

Tsiolkas demonstrates that overt homosexual narrative has evolved and developed into some of the best Australian literature of the twenty-first century so far. His homosexual characters are now inside, looking out.

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