

# Learningguild Letter

1.2004

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

What can best be done to encourage many English-speakers to want to write and speak better, and to help them to learn to do so? After all those verbs, of which Don Watson would approve, let us have two short nouns: we have to attend to **motives** and **methods**. (No need here for *motivation* and *methodology*.)

With a view to answering that question, I review two books that have attracted a good deal of notice since their publication last year. One is Don Watson's *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, and the other Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. (That title, for whose appreciation the reader needs the dust jacket as well as p.2, derives from a wildlife manual which, with a ridiculous comma of the interrupting sort, says of the panda "Eats, shoots and leaves", so that three words instead of one appear to be verbs.)

What is for me the best part of Watson's book (pp.156-165) suggests both a motive and a method. It includes an appreciation of the English of the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible. The motive is Watson's own, though revealed too late in a book that is mainly and rather tediously scornful of one example after another of lifeless and empty public language: it is respect and gratitude for examples of English memorably used. The method would be the study of such language, so that students understand why its use is memorable and find and show the fruit of such study in their own thought, writing and speech.

We should recognize that Watson is not arguing that there should be no modern versions of religious texts, but that they should not be in "everyday modern prose", i.e., as one might more specifically say, in prose that is trite, ponderous or banal.

The great works of public language like the *Book of Common Prayer* are poetic works. In the poetry is the mystery which religion concerns and on which it depends. In the poetry the inexpressible is sensed. Many church people will tell you that when it adopted everyday modern prose, the church cut off an artery to its soul.

So their argument goes; and every time we hear a modern marriage celebrated we might agree. ‘Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder’, it used to say; and ‘With all my worldly goods I thee endow’. But now they are as likely to say something about partnerships and sharing everything, and it is hard to think of a sensible reason for the change. It’s not tradition we miss so much as the ring of truth. Because in the old language is the old truth, the one that the writers found in the words.

... The power of the *Book of Common Prayer* or the King James Bible lies not in its antiquity, but in the conviction that the words convey.

(p.175f)

Better to add ‘and in the words themselves’. Part of the power of the words Watson has quoted lies in the concise contrasts: ‘joined together’ and ‘put asunder’; ‘with all my worldly goods’ (with the suggestion that they matter, but not too much) and ‘I thee endow’. On p.156 Watson has quoted the former General and President Ulysses Grant’s splendid answer to the question how he had managed, though with terminal cancer, to write his memoirs of 250,000 words in a year: ‘**with verbs**’. *Endow*, in itself and in its position, is a good example.

In the next paragraph, however, we have “*I hope I have not written a book about English grammar*” (in italics to stress that to use the verb *hope* and say who hopes is much better than to misuse *hopefully*). Of course I am not going to say that he should have written such a book; but Grant’s ‘with verbs’ itself suggests that **grammar** deserves unapologetic attention. Watson’s next sentence but one is “If we ever decide to take grammar seriously again, we may as well bring back elocution, which is its distant relation.” A fair response to that conditional and tentative statement is a conditional question from the Authorized Version (I Corinthians 14.8): “if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” Watson is ambivalent about grammar.

He does tell us what he cares about most. On p.45 he has a quotation from one painter, Delacroix, about another, Titian, ending with “... he disdains everything that does not lead him to a livelier expression of his thought”, on which Watson comments: “It is unlikely that a better general rule for writing was ever conceived” (p.45). His verdict on sports commentary expresses his indictment against so much of the recent language of business executives, politicians and educationists: “What we are losing is language expressing character or imagination” (p.54).

It is revealing, and moving, that what Watson remembers most gratefully from his schooldays in an Australian rural school in the sixties is Shakespeare: the boy would pant out famous lines as he rode his bike uphill, and discovered that “beautifully arranged words could liberate, possess, bewilder and intoxicate” (p.164f). Concerning grammar, though, which in the late sixties was largely eliminated from secondary school English by supposed experts who had generally benefited from it themselves, he says uncertainly “Perhaps the curriculum should have allowed more time for something so important”

(p.163). In fact, to appreciate Grant’s remark and act upon it requires that one learns to distinguish verbs in particular contexts from other parts of speech, and develop an acquaintance with them that reveals the absurdity of “Verbs are doing-words”. One must also learn **how to use verbs**; and therefore, for example, to know that every normal sentence (others, if not too numerous, may in context be quite acceptable) has one or more backbone verbs — in this sentence, the modal *must* — in addition to the verbs (also personed, or, to use the old and hardly helpful word, finite, but not backbone) that occur in any subordinate clauses there may be.

The analogy is ludicrous whereby Watson says of such people as prescriptive grammarians (p.11) “These people are essential, but only in the way that lifeboats are to an ocean liner” (i.e., to get you out of dire trouble which you will not usually have). Let us say instead: “Grammar, taught along with a progressive expansion of vocabulary, shows you how to walk and march and run and climb with language, and not stumble, slouch or peter out.” One simple example: Watson rightly scorns on p.20 the absurdity of the statement “If [workers] are not appreciated for their value-added they will go somewhere else”, but the special absurdity here lies not so much in the common over-use of the idea of “adding value” but in the fact that the hyphenated *value-added* can only be an adjective, where something nounal is needed. If ‘the value they add’ had been used instead, Watson would hardly have cited the sentence, though he might well have preferred ‘what they contribute’.

He recognizes the importance of **clarity** without doing justice to its indispensability or the pathways to its achievement. After giving us some of his many examples of lifeless, cliché-ridden language (better to have fewer, with succinct analysis of what has gone wrong), he says on p.23f:

Clarity and precision are highly desirable in language .... But language is capable of expressing more than information: it is a vehicle of the imagination and the emotions.

On p.114 he quotes Primo Levi: “one can be clear and boring, clear and useless, clear and untruthful, clear and vulgar”. The maxim I offer in *Making up Sentences* (5:1) is “Be clear, and don’t be dull”, and the main pathways are learning the grammar that enables one to construct a variety of sentences well, acquiring the virtues of conciseness and straightforwardness (usually through correction and encouragement), and developing a wide vocabulary and an aptitude for aptness.

Watson mentions Gowers once, referring only to the early booklet *Plain Words*, whereas *The Complete Plain Words* has long and deservedly been a Penguin Reference book from which so much can be learnt about clarity. His bibliography does not include Burchfield’s excellent *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, and gives only the third edition of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, whose fourth edition appeared in 2000 with a glossary of grammatical terms of which the modern reader will often be ignorant: the glossary is not, however, a competent one, and no glossary can replace a systematic introduction. (I have written about all three of these books in Appendix C of *Making up Sentences*.) Watson casually says on p.154 that people who “need to learn or recall the principles of grammar” can go to Strunk and White or Fowler: those books, like

Gowers, **assume** grammatical knowledge in their readers, and are insufficiently intelligible without it. He makes no mention at all of the value of a rich and systematic guide to vocabulary such as the Australian *A Wealth of Words* (1960), by H.G.Fowler and Norma Russell, which would assist almost any reader to widen and deepen his or her appropriation of that wealth.

Watson's book has no numbering for the four chapters that follow its introduction, and no table of contents; and one wearies of the sentences, poorly or well composed, that are quoted in the left margins of most right-hand pages but not discussed. He did not give enough thought to the book's structure, to how best to give it cumulative force rather than accumulated scorn. The book is not sufficiently constructed or constructive. So far, I think that, like Paul Keating, whose biography and many of whose speeches he has written, Don Watson has been a man of scorn and passion rather than of balance and synthesis; all four factors are needed, and preferably maintained in combination, both in politics and in education.

Lynne Truss's book has a very clear structure, though the table of contents does not reveal it and the chapters are not numbered. After the introduction, which ends by explaining what the book is "about", or rather for (and I shall shortly discuss that), we have three chapters on, respectively, the apostrophe, the comma, and the colon and semi-colon. Then there is a mixed bag: exclamation and question marks, italics, inverted commas, dashes and brackets, and the three dots. The sixth chapter explains the uses of the hyphen, and the final one considers the impact of emailing and text messaging and concludes with "we should fight like tigers to preserve our punctuation" (p.201).

The book is, in fact, an intelligent, lively and accurate guide to punctuation, with some fascinating glimpses of its history, and it collects many entertaining errors, such as *Pupil's entrance* and *Please replace the trolley's* in the long list on pp. 49-54. It is worth reading and worth buying, though, as I shall argue, it has two serious faults.

Would I recommend it to someone who knew little about punctuation and wished to master it? Only as something to follow shorter, systematic accounts. In *Making up Sentences*, I recommend at 5:3.8 some short guides and the excellent single chapter on punctuation in Gowers (like Watson, Truss mentions, in this case in her bibliography, only the early booklet *Plain Words* rather than the Penguin Reference book). Then, in three ways, I link punctuation to grammar, stressing that one should check that what appears as a sentence forms a coherent whole, distinguishing direct questions from those which are "embedded" in sentences that refer to them rather than ask them, and warning that the advice "Put a comma where you'd pause" is misleading: commas need grammatical justification. 5:3.12 deals with apostrophes. Two sections of Appendix A set out abbreviations that I use in marking errors in punctuation and concerning apostrophes, and provide explanations and references.

The two serious faults of the book are found also in Watson's: a tone of scorn and superiority rather than of sympathy and utterly constructive intent, and a lack of

unapologetic emphasis on grammar. The book is “mainly ... about making sticklers feel good about their seventh-sense ability to see dead punctuation (whisper it in verge-of-tears tones: “*It doesn’t know it’s dead*”) and to defend their sense of humour” (p.34). Hence the title of the first chapter: “Introduction — The Seventh Sense”. Thus it is a book for a large in-group, those (most of them over fifty) who have learnt enough about punctuation, usually by being taught and corrected, to recognize and be amused by the errors of people without that good fortune. No book can be a great one if it sets out to make a main body of its readers “feel good” about having an ability they have learned. Their sense of humour needs no defence, and the ignorance of the untaught deserves no mock-sympathy; the apostrophe in *childrens*’ and the comma in ‘Eats, shoots and leaves’ are not dead but simply misused; and no special sense is needed to detect the misuse.

On the day I commenced the previous paragraph I began to tutor a young Australian, a native speaker of English, who has consulted me because he wants to learn how to write good letters and essays, with a view to writing to newspapers and undertaking tertiary study. Above all such a person needs **encouragement**, along with a growing mastery of the principles and distinctions that a more systematic secondary education in English would have offered him. My book, read, marked and heard on CD, will enable him to develop that mastery, not least through its exercises; but he should also make use of such books about the range and background of “a wealth of words” as the one with that title I have mentioned. He commented on and was glad of my enthusiasm, and also the range of Learningguild’s activities. I am, certainly, a critical kind of person, tending often to perceive and point out defects, and in teaching I use the red pen a great deal, though often requiring the student to make the correction needed; but I understand the significance of Aesop’s fable of the Sun and the Wind. It was the Sun’s warmth that led the man to remove his coat; the cold gale of the Wind could not remove it. The student must be afforded opportunities to appreciate, and sometimes to marvel at, good examples of writing (as Don Watson did as a boy) and to recognize and delight in growing powers.

Truss’s own English is generally lively and spirited, and her study of punctuation has been wide-ranging. She says (pp.14-16) that she was not taught punctuation or grammar at school, and on p.32 writes “I am not a grammarian”, and then

To me a subordinate clause will for ever be (since I heard the actor Martin Jarvis describe it thus) one of Santa’s little helpers.

I shall return to that disingenuous remark. Let us first look at some defects in Truss’s English, and consider how they have come about (while recognizing that we are all fallible and need to be self-critical).

For ‘He shot himself as a child’ she offers (p.82) the replacement ‘He shot, himself, as a child’. That is an improvement; but how much better to get rid of the misleading order and put the emphatic pronoun directly after the personal one: ‘He himself shot as a child’ or ‘He himself, as a child, went shooting’. On p.89, having noted about a particular use of the comma that it “doesn’t arise very much these days”, she adds “I wonder why?” The question mark should not be there: the *why* is short for the “embedded” or “indirect” ‘why it doesn’t’. Truss mentions that construction on p.141,

but rashly blames erroneous question marks accompanying it on “the famous upward inflection caught by all teenage viewers of *Neighbours*”. The grammar one needs to learn here is, fundamentally, the distinction between questions and other kinds of sentences, so that the rule is not against “adding question marks to sentences containing indirect questions”, but against adding question marks to any sentence that is not, taken as a whole, a question. ‘I wonder why’ is not such a sentence. There is no justification for ‘What did Zimbabwe used to be called?’ (p.123): ‘What used ...?’ or ‘What did ... use ...?’. In ‘our system of punctuation is limited enough already without us dismissing half of it as rubbish’ (p.136), the combination of personal pronoun and participle is much inferior to that of the possessive adjective and gerund: ‘our dismissing’. *Adore* in its colloquial use is not followed by the infinitive with *to*, which follows it on p.164: ‘Book reviewers in particular adore to use *sic*’ (‘delight in using?’). *Refute* is not used as in Truss’s ‘We must refute the label “dinosaurs”’ (p.65): ‘we must reject the label “dinosaurs”, and say why’.

These errors all suggest that grammar, including the grammar of particular words, needs learning and emphasis alongside punctuation. Truss’s profession of ignorance of the nature of subordinate clauses is insincere, since she rightly distinguishes “defining” clauses from “non-defining” ones at p.93. She says of the first that you don’t need to present it with a pair of commas; in fact, you must not. (The terms ‘identifying’ and ‘non-identifying’ are clearer.) We are making a grammatical distinction here, just as we are making a grammatical point when we say of ‘Eats, shoots and leaves’ that it wrongly interrupts with a single comma the progress from the transitive verb to its object-location.

I conclude, then, that competence and excellence (and delight) in the use of one’s language require attention to all three of grammar, punctuation and vocabulary (and vocabulary involves, of course, spelling and pronunciation). Clear and lively expositions of them all should be sought and provided, in texts and in speech, with illustration, revision and testing at many points. Fortunate are those who have good teachers, for oral and written exposition (both planned and in response to questions) can be so valuable; but it is possible to teach oneself from good materials, though preferably with guidance and feedback. To foster the wide use of such materials, and to produce new ones, is a vital activity for Learningguild. At present a major concern of mine is to plan and produce a succession of booklets-and-cassettes that would take people from the phonic alphabet through the various common combinations of letters and related sounds, and through much of the vocabulary of the extremely valuable *Oxford Elementary Learner’s Dictionary*, to a level at which they could use for reference, and then work through, *Making up Sentences*, and then begin to take the repeatable examination for the Learningguild Certificate in Reasoning and Expression. Initially, this project is intended for the two schools we are assisting in India; but I hope its products will be much more widely used. It is that kind of guidance, cumulative, sequential and developmental, with repeated opportunity to appreciate and delight in English memorably employed, which those whose English is criticized by Don Watson and Lynne Truss have lacked.

Yours,

John Howes

# Multiple Sclerosis – Must Solve Mystery Sickness

**CHRISTINE PITT**, a member of Learningguild who teaches English to people from other language backgrounds, writes: “As a person with multiple sclerosis, and an MS Ambassador — one of a group of 25 people with MS who want to increase understanding in the community about MS — I was grateful for the opportunity to speak at the Learningguild Friday-evening group this year [20th August], and now for this chance to put into print our story about the nature and impacts of MS, and the need for continued research into a complex disease.”

One of the early accounts of MS, which is a description of typical relapsing MS, was provided in the diary of Augustus D’Este, an illegitimate grandson of King George III:

In the month of December 1822, I travelled to the Highlands of Scotland to pass some days with a Relation. ... Shortly after arriving, I was obliged to have my letters read to me, and their answers written for me, as my eyes were so attacked with indistinctness of vision. ... Soon after, I went to Ireland, and without anything having been done to my eyes, they completely recovered their strength and distinctness of vision. ... Now (1827) a new disease began to shew itself: every day I found, by slow degrees, my strength leaving me: I could clearly perceive each succeeding day that I went up and down the staircase with greater difficulty. I remained in such state of weakness for about 21 days ... then my strength gradually returned. I was never able to run as fast as formerly, nor could I venture to dance.

Such a diary entry could just as easily have been written today: it shows the variation in symptoms in MS and their often random and intermittent nature. There is also a wide variation between individuals: there are over two million cases worldwide, and virtually two million different stories. Hence it is often difficult initially for doctors to diagnose MS, and family and friends find the problems of those who have it perplexing. More importantly, determining the cause and thence the cure is a complex problem for science. Since 1868, when Jean-Martin Charcot first named *sclerose en plaques* as a distinct disease, there has been ever-increasing research into it, and a gradual piecing together of the puzzle. However, the actual cause of MS is still unknown, and so there is, as yet, no cure.

What do we know about MS? To begin with, it is a disease of the Central Nervous System (CNS – brain, spine and optic nerve), characterised by demyelination of nerves (loss of the myelin covering). The name ‘multiple sclerosis’ suggests that there are many scars. Recent research at La Trobe and Melbourne Universities has shown that nerve fibres are also damaged. The disease is now usually diagnosed by MRI X-rays, which show the lesions of demyelination. Symptoms depend on which area of the CNS is damaged.

There are two main patterns in the MS disease process:

- relapsing/remitting MS, where, like Augustus D'Este, the person experiences attacks (relapse) and then the symptoms improve (remit). Remissions, when often the person has no symptoms, can last weeks or years, and the frequency and severity of attacks, when they come, cannot be predicted.
- progressive MS, where the symptoms steadily worsen, although the nature, degree and rate of disability vary considerably.

MS is an auto-immune disease, in which, for an unknown reason, the body's immune system "attacks" the myelin and nerve fibres, causing disruption to nerve transmission. It is usually diagnosed between the ages of 18 and 50, and is the most common neurological disease of young adults. It affects more women than men: the ratio is about 2:1. Women with MS often experience a remission in symptoms while they are pregnant, but a worsening of their symptoms 3-6 months after they give birth.

It occurs more in temperate latitudes than in others, and the incidence increases with distance from the equator: for every hundred thousand people, the incidence in Queensland is 20, in Victoria 50, and in Tasmania 75. It is much more common in Caucasians than in others, and mainly seen in Europe, the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia, whereas in Japan, also at a temperate latitude, the incidence is four per hundred thousand.

Genetics is involved, as 10% of people with MS also have a relative with MS (my mother had MS). However, if one identical twin has MS, the other has only a 30% likelihood of developing it, so there are also environmental factors.

The symptoms vary immensely, and many are "invisible", i.e., not obvious to an outsider. Fatigue is the symptom common to most people with MS and the reason why 40% of people with it give up full-time work. There may be cognitive changes: a reduction in memory and planning abilities further affects the ability to work. Other symptoms include:

- optic neuritis and other visual disturbances
- muscle weakness and mobility difficulties
- numbness and "pins and needles"
- heat sensitivity (we have an electricity concession in summer for air-conditioning)
- difficulties in balance and co-ordination
- pain (some people feel their feet are burning or icy or both)
- bladder and bowel disturbances.

The variability in MS is mirrored in some of the people I know. Peter, aged 46, who used to own a computer company, was diagnosed five years ago, started using a wheelchair after two years, can now barely stand to transfer to my car, and has permanent foggy eyesight. Thelma, aged 70, who was diagnosed 30 years ago, looks “normal”, teaches at U3A, and needs only a rest each afternoon. I am 51, was diagnosed fourteen years ago, still walk (with crutches), still drive (carefully), still work as an English teacher (part-time and seated). But the heaviest burden of MS is on people such as Faye, who is my age and was diagnosed at the same time, but has steadily deteriorated with progressive MS, and cannot now feed herself. She is fiercely resisting the inevitability of moving to a nursing home.

The explanation of such variation in MS, and of why previously healthy people can be so badly affected by it, is still largely a medical mystery. Much excellent research is being undertaken worldwide. Researchers are trying to work out the inter-relationship between genetic and environmental factors: sunlight, vitamin D, diet, infections, hormones and the immune system. The MS Society has set up the \$30 million “Multiple Sclerosis Research Australia” (with a \$200,000 government contribution) to co-ordinate Australian MS research.

Scientific studies are seeking answers to all aspects of MS, as is illustrated in some titles of presentations at a recent Melbourne conference I attended:

- “The role of Epstein-Barr virus infection in the pathogenesis of MS: a new hypothesis”
- “Analysis of genetic variants of chemokines for association with multiple sclerosis”
- “Vitamin D levels in people with MS and healthy community controls”.
- “The relationship between stress, coping, fatigue and relapse in people with MS”.

There is good research, and there are advances all the time, but few definitive answers.

Since the eradication of polio, multiple sclerosis has become the most common cause of paralysis in Western countries. We still have to find the explanation for a disease that forces a person such as Faye to go into a nursing home. There are many dedicated scientists inching closer to putting together the MS puzzle. When my mother was diagnosed in 1979, there were no drugs and the cure was “twenty years off”. Now there are four drugs available to slow the disease’s course, and the cure is “ten years off”. With concerted scientific effort and financial support for co-ordinated work, I hope that the answer becomes a reality, and that, like polio, MS becomes a disease in history.

We should like to express appreciation of donations received in recent weeks, especially those to assist the Okhla Estate school in New Delhi, in response to the article by Stephen Howes in our last issue (2.2003).

## A good time ...?

*This is a revised version of an essay that received a high mark in the A grade in the March examination for the Learningguild Certificate in Reasoning and Expression. The writer, a Melbourne accountant, attained the upper B level in that exam and she went on to an A in the September one. The essay is on topic K in Section 5, which ran as follows:*

David Hookes, an Australian cricket player and coach who died this year, was quoted as having said “We’re here for a good time, not a long time.” Explain what you take to be the attitude expressed by that remark, and discuss it.

The attitude expressed in this remark is one of living for the moment. It suggests a short-term hedonistic approach to life. It is not a view that would sit well with the teaching of many religions, but it is a familiar credo of many a rock song and many an enthusiastic party animal.

It is a remark with a bittersweet edge, a duality of meaning, and the recent death of David Hookes makes it even more poignant. It suggests a fear of aging and a fear of contemplation. It suggests a desire to ignore the consequences of one’s actions and to value only those things that constitute “a good time”.

There are, of course, many reasons to celebrate this sort of approach to life. The remark promotes the need to value every moment of life and make the best of it. So many of us appear trapped by worries about the future or regrets about the past that we fail to notice and enjoy the day-to-day — the beauty of a sunny day, the taste of a perfect coffee, the laughter of a good friend. The moment is really all we have, as we cannot change what has passed or guarantee what is to come.

Beyond the suggestion of living for the moment, the remark appears to go further and emphasise the maximisation of the now, quite possibly to the detriment of the future. This is perhaps where it goes off the rails, and suggests excess in the moment, and to hell with the consequences! Alcohol, smoking, fast cars, late nights — all those “fun things” come with consequences and, to me, it is essential to stream such consequences into your life without permanently damaging the long term. I want to have a good time **all** my life, but perhaps that comes down to what I consider to be a good time.

A good time can encompass so many things, not just the boozy noisy nights suggested above, which tend to be associated with a remark like that of David Hookes. A good time can include being nice to your grandma, playing the piano or achieving something worthwhile. These things contribute to the long term, rather than detract from it.

Unfortunately, having “a good time” can distract you from other areas of life that can have an equal, and often greater, sweetness and value. It seems we don’t always realise it until we are older, but there can be a great satisfaction in enjoying the fruits of hard work and delayed gratification. Achievements are often more worthwhile and satisfying if you have to work long and hard for them. Of course, failure when you have worked hard is deflating and can make you question your efforts or your ability. But at least you’ve tried!

And, for me, that’s the key. If you haven’t had a go, then you’ll never know. Most of us (with luck) will get to the long term, and it would be satisfying to get there having experienced a myriad adventures and personal challenges. Not just hedonistic good times but a few successes, a few failures and greater insight and wisdom. We may hope that this increase in insight and wisdom will make the good times, in the short and in the long term, even more sweet.

## *A Certain Maritime Incident* and other books on Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers

**MARGARET HOWES** *is the coordinator of SASH (Support for Asylum Seekers at Hearings), a group of volunteers who individually accompany asylum seekers to hearings of their case. She greatly values the work done by her many colleagues in the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre, whose offices are at 67 Jeffcott St, West Melbourne.*

There are by now a variety of books about Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers in recent years. Here I give a brief account of five of them, saying most about the third and latest.

Some background first. Between 1991 and 2001, 8000 asylum seekers arrived on our shores by boat. They had come from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan, and had used people-smugglers to reach Indonesia via Malaysia. The voyage to Australia was the cheapest option available. From there they made the final hazardous voyage by sea to Australia and were promptly detained. The available detention centres, remote and harsh, soon became overcrowded. An additional factor that caused much anxiety among the asylum seekers was the length of time it took for the Government to determine their status, as well as the fact that, after October 1999, the only visa granted was a Temporary Protection Visa for three years. The holders of these visas are eligible for income

support, but have limited access to resettlement services. If they are fortunate enough to get a job, then they must pay the top tax rate.

*Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, by Peter Mares, was published in mid-2001 before the *Tampa* incident. This was the first book published about recent asylum seekers, and its author was then presenter of the regional current affairs program *Asia Pacific*, broadcast on Radio Australia and Radio National. As early as 1995 he had won an award in legal reporting for a story on Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. The book's publication was followed by public meetings sponsored by the Jesuits. While some committed activists, including lawyers, had been aware of the effects of the Government's introduction of indefinite mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrived on our shores uninvited, this book marked the beginning of a growing awareness of the inhumane treatment of these people. It is extremely detailed and valuable and, although most of the asylum seekers are now in the community (but many still on Temporary Protection Visas), it is still very relevant and essential reading for anyone wanting to become better informed.

From *Borderline* many of us learnt of the effects of the Government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers in detention and their lack of any certainty for the future. We came to realise how cruel the introduction of Temporary Protection Visas was, with their denial of the right to family reunion or for the holder to leave the country if he or she wished to return. The book also had first-hand detailed accounts of how inmates of these Detention Centres were treated and it made people aware of problems associated with their management, such as lack of accountability, as they were now privately run.

Most Australians will recall the *Tampa* incident that began on the 26th of August 2001. A Norwegian tanker, at the request of the Australian Government, rescued 483 people from a sinking ship and was then denied entry into the Australian port at Christmas Island. The captain of the *Tampa* entered the harbour anyway to try to get assistance for his passengers. The Australian Government called in the military, who boarded the *Tampa* and took charge of the asylum seekers. Eventually they were transferred to the *Manoora* and taken to Nauru, to wait while their claims were being assessed. So the "Pacific Solution" was created, and it is still in existence.

I am told that this incident led to five books, but the only one I have read is *Dark Victory*, by David Marr and Marian Wilkinson. Both are authors and journalists. Their book not only deals in detail with the *Tampa* incident, but also made public some of what went on behind the scenes in the Prime Minister's Department as well as the armed forces, particularly in relation to "Operation Relex" (p.120f). They quote the following instruction: "Commencing immediately the Australian Defence Force will conduct enhanced surveillance, patrol and response operations in international waters between the Indonesia archipelago and Australia. This will involve five naval vessels and four P-3C Orion aircraft." The aim of this "intensification" was to deter people-smugglers and turn back boats to Indonesia. Vessels with asylum seekers on board would be given a warning and, if they did not stop and turn around, would be boarded once they entered what is

called Australia's "contiguous zone", 24 nautical miles from shore. Whatever actions were to follow the boarding, in each case, were to be specifically directed by government. The final chapters of *Dark Victory* deal with the activities of Operation Relex and the traumatic effects its implementation had on asylum seekers and navy personnel, as the boats, full of stressed, frightened and angry asylum seekers, were repaired and turned back to Indonesia.

The book's writing is lively and, if it weren't the story of real people and real-life situations, it would make an excellent thriller.

The third book, *A Certain Maritime Incident*, by Tony Kevin and published in 2004, deals with one of the boats that would have been turned around under Operation Relex if it had not sunk. The author has had a long career in the Prime Minister's Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and had been Australia's ambassador to Poland and to Cambodia.

On the 19th of October 2001, a boat carrying 421 passengers left the shores of Indonesia bound for Christmas Island. It was massively overcrowded and unseaworthy. Not long after the start, some 21 to 24 people got off at an island because they considered it too unsafe to continue. Of the other passengers 353 people, mostly women and children, drowned when the boat capsized and sank at 3pm. Not until about 7am the following morning did a fishing boat arrive on the scene and rescue the survivors. Many of those who drowned were wives and children of husbands in Australia who had been granted Temporary Protection Visas and so were unable to leave Australia or arrange for their families to join them. Those who survived the terrible ordeal were not allowed to enter Australia until their personal claims as refugees had been assessed. Few will forget the photographs of the three daughters of Ahmaed Al-Zalimi, who lives in Sydney and was refused permission to travel to Indonesia to comfort his grieving wife.

This vessel became known as SIEV X. 'SIEV' is an acronym for 'suspected illegal entry vessel'. As the boats sailed from Indonesia to Australia and were intercepted by Operation Relex, they were given numbers. Because this boat sank before it was given a number, the author gave it the letter X.

The first part of the book sets out the details of the recruitment of asylum seekers to the boat and their forced embarkation, the voyage, the sinking, the eventual rescue of some by an Indonesian fishing boat, and their return to Jakarta when the whole world learnt of the tragedy. Included in this section is a discussion about where the boat actually sank. John Howard maintained that it was in Indonesian waters and therefore the responsibility of that country, but other evidence shows that this is not so.

The second part details the Senate Investigation, originally into "the Children Overboard Affair" but expanded, through the persistence of the author, to include what came to be called "a certain maritime incident". Nevertheless, although the efforts of Tony Kevin brought to light some details about it, the Government was able to maintain

silence on various critical matters. The difficulty of obtaining information is illustrated by the reproduction, at the front of the book, of a cable from Indonesia to various members of Government and others with several paragraphs blanked out.

At the Senate enquiry Commissioner Kelty provided new information on the people-smuggling disruption program in Indonesia, which was instigated by the Australian Federal Police, who also provided training for it (p.11). It is suggested in the book that such training may have led to covert illegal disruption, in the form of making boats unseaworthy, without the knowledge of the AFP (p.215).

While some readers may find some of the detail, particularly in the second half, rather overwhelming, this is an important book and will be invaluable for future historians when this period is examined in more detail and the full facts, which the Government was not willing to release, are known.

One cannot but admire a man who has, as he says, “at considerable cost to [his] public reputation and family finances”, adopted so wholeheartedly the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr that are quoted at the beginning of the Epilogue (p.255):

Without justice, there can be no peace. He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it.

I should mention here the work of the story-teller Arnold Zable, who writes for newspapers and presents to many audiences the stories of asylum seekers. In particular he often tells the story of Amal Hassan Basry who herself, with her son, was a survivor of SIEV X and often speaks in public. She feels she has a mission to tell her story so that those who drowned will never be forgotten. Those of us who have had the privilege to hear her will never forget the bravery of this woman.

Frank Brennan’s *Tampering with Asylum*, published in 2003, is a measured book in which the author seeks to do justice to the problems confronting both sides of the argument. In the Preface (p. x) he writes:

Though it may be convenient for a government to keep people in detention for months while their asylum claims are being processed, the deprivation of liberty and the harm, especially to children, is disproportionate to the convenience. Having wrestled with the moral issues for a year, I sympathise with Minister Philip Ruddock and his colleagues who are anxious to keep the borders secure and the country safe. I empathise with the asylum seekers who have spent years in detention in remote desert locations before most of them have then been recognised as refugees. They rightly invoke our protection obligations, having fled the same terror we fear, condemning the terrorist as much as any of us do.

The author acknowledges the rationale behind the Government's policy. He examines the history of migration, with particular attention to asylum seekers, their treatment today and what other countries do. The final chapter, entitled "A warm-hearted, decent international citizen once again", presents his suggestions on how Australia should correct its current policy and laws (p.213f). These include limited detention for identity, health and security checks, with the proviso that no child should be treated as a security risk. He also urges the abolition of the Pacific Solution and the abandonment of the concept of a distinct Australian migration zone.

The voices of asylum seekers were given prominence in The Lonely Planet's *From Nothing to Zero*. This is a collection of letters from refugees in Australia's detention centres and those of the Pacific Solution, with a preface and introductions to each chapter by Julian Burnside QC. These letters were part of a correspondence that had sprung up between concerned Australian citizens and asylum seekers.

*A Last Resort?* is the report of a National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, carried out by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It was established in November 2001 and its report was released in April 2004. It is chilling.

A total of 976 children were in immigration detention in 1999-2000, 1,923 in 2000-1, 1,696 in 2001-2, and 703 in 2002-3. Most had arrived by boat. According to the report more than 92% of all children arriving by boat since 1999 have been recognised by Australia to be refugees, and in the case of Iraqi children the figure is as high as 98%. These young children were forced to remain for months on end in detention, often without adequate schooling, and in an environment permeated by stress and anxiety – and some are still there. This publication is yet another indictment of the way we have treated asylum seekers and their children.

Despite the violation of human rights that has occurred, and is still occurring in Baxter Detention Centre, we do still live in a democracy in which such books, all critical of Government policy, can be published. The growing concern in the general community that is detected by those associated with asylum seekers is due, in some measure, to the production and availability of these books. They deserve to be purchased or borrowed by many more people who want Australian policies to be fair, decent and generous.

At our Friday-evening meeting on March 5th, we watched and discussed Kate Durham's video called "Australia's Pacific Solution". It deals with themes mentioned in this article, and makes several aspects of them particularly vivid. Learningguild has a copy available for borrowing.

## WHAT'S A GOOD INTRODUCTION TO ...

### *APPRECIATING POETRY?*

In October this year I began to tutor a girl in Year 7 whose parents came to Australia from Vietnam twenty-five years ago. Her languages are Mandarin and English. I have been struck by her enjoyment of English poetry and of reading it aloud. We read Thomas Nashe's *Spring, the sweet spring ...* and Shakespeare's sonnet *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* from Colin J. Horne and Maurice O'Brien's chronologically ordered *The Progress of Poetry*. Then we turned to *Poetry Workshop*, published in 1963 by Nelson and compiled, with plenty of comment but not too much, by N.Russell and H.J.Chatfield, both, I believe, women and Victorian schoolteachers. They intended it for what they called Forms 3 and 4 (Years 9 and 10). It is suitable for anyone at the secondary stage who already has quite a wide English vocabulary and enjoys learning new words. In this brief review I shall expand on what my pupil has written about the book. Her adjective *encouraging* seems to me just right.

This book provides opportunities for students to study the themes, the feelings and the craftsmanship of poets. It is an encouraging book for reading poetry silently and aloud, and discussing it. It also stimulates ideas about creative writing.

The poems in two-thirds of the book, accompanied by brief comments and questions, are grouped under seven themes: murder and sudden death, snakes, cats, war, birds, people, and finally feelings and experiences. I should have welcomed the inclusion of more poems to which young people could relate their own experience of perplexity, alienation, gratitude, and wonder.

The remainder of the book concerns the poet's craftsmanship or techniques. It is suitably divided into three sections, on rhythms, contrasts and imagery. In the first we go, for example, from Hilaire Belloc's *Tarantella* (which my pupil and I read aloud) to an excerpt from C.J.Dennis's *A Song of Rain*:

From Toolangi's wooded mountains  
Sounds the song of splashing fountains;  
Sovereign summer's might is waning;  
And it's raining — raining — raining!

The compilers' experience and intent appear in this sentence on p.126: "Let [these poems] stimulate your imagination, sharpen your senses, and exercise your mind as you read them." The poems in the three sections are well chosen and the comments and questions perceptive. On p.114 the compilers praise Margaret O'Donnell's chapter on rhythm in her book *Feet on the Ground* (a text I enjoyed in Form 5), and they should have done some of what she does to explain some of the commoner metres, so that young people could recognize and use them. The book is, however, a sensitive guide to the appreciation of poetry, with many fine poems. It and the other books I have mentioned may be borrowed from the Learningguild Library.

JH

#### CORRECTION

I am grateful that, in a letter of September discussing my treatment in *L'g L 2.2003* of his essay "Education in a Secular Age", Dr John Silber of Boston University noted a slip of mine: I had referred on p.5 to Kant as saying that nothing is good in itself except a good will. 'In itself' should be replaced by 'without qualification'. Many things are good in themselves (and, as Plato has it in *Republic* 357-8, some good also for their consequences and some only for their consequences); but anything that would otherwise be a good is vitiated if it is enjoyed or used in a manner conflicting with what Kant calls "the principles of a good will" (H.J.Paton's edition *The Moral Law; Groundwork* 1-3). I made the correction in later printings. JH