

The Trouble with Banality

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Bernard Cohen

Hardly Beach Weather

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OF ALL THE talked-about new voices in Australian fiction of the early 1990s, Bernard Cohen's is one of relatively few that has been regularly heard since. A decade after *Tourism*, he's back with his fourth book and the improbable but apt position of writer-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum in Bloomsbury. Despite the London residence, it's such American postmodernists as Donald Barthelme or Robert Coover who seem to have influenced Cohen's writing, which nevertheless is in a distinctly Australian vernacular mode. There is the same interest in the fragment, the narrative shard, and, conversely, a lack of concern about wholeness and traditional completion and, frequently, a preoccupation with fables and archetypal story forms. *Tourism*, brief and very readable, is often narratively opaque, each of its fragments possibly introducing a new voice. It is also very witty in a deadpan way, as a series of vignettes unfolds under the name of one or another Australian town in an alphabetical series: we learn, for example, that Mittagong is 'the largest small town in the Southern Hemisphere'.

Like the American postmodernists, Cohen has never been afraid to work his readers or, indeed, to risk boring them with his occasional opacity and transparent acknowledgment of life's banalities. The largely unreadable entry for 'Newcastle' in *Tourism*, for example, is only a paragraph or so but presages longer stretches of difficult material later on in his work.

These are the risks for fiction that, in seeking to be of and for its consumerist, materialist, late-capitalist times, elevates the artefacts of empty materialism to a position of central importance. Cohen's books mock the commodification of everything. In *Snowdome* (1998), Sydney in the future has become museumified; the Harbour Bridge is no longer a bridge but a view, and the city itself is now under a dome. The problem is simply that when *everything* is banal, when all culture is mocked, why keep reading?

In Cohen's new novel, *Hardly Beach Weather*, Maria, one of the two main characters, photographs war memorials in Australian country towns. The preoccupation with the country town and the idea of memorialising a memorial both go right back to *Tourism*, and this book is in some ways a fresh take on the earlier work. The narrative structure is based on a

drive from Sydney to Adelaide. Jack and Maria are no longer in a relationship, but Jack, the narrator, sportingly and perhaps for other reasons, has agreed to drive Maria to her new lover and new life in Adelaide. So they drive west from Sydney, away from the coast where Jack feels comfortable, into the heart of the country.

They take it slowly, Maria pursuing her photography, and they pick up occasional hitchhikers. People they meet show an uncontrollable propensity for narrative. They assume that Jack and Maria are still lovers and use that as a cue for their own stories of love and failure. There is a running gag: everybody spots the travellers as being from Sydney (even when they're almost in Adelaide), and the contrast between stereotypical country ways and city ways is always invoked.

Although the book has an obvious narrative direction with its travel motif, it is evident fairly early that its focus is not going to be on emotional outcomes of a traditional variety ('can Jack and Maria work it out?'). Instead, the reader is more and more insistently alerted to the stories within the story. Jack's narrative voice gives way to secondary narrators. Gradually, some familiar narrative fragments from Australian lore make themselves quietly evident. Four policemen sit around in a café, for example, talking about the swagman they've tried to arrest, who has jumped into a billabong to elude them; a man rants about the city barber who tried to cut his throat. Jack, whose fairytale name now begins to take on some resonance, wanders through it all slightly bewildered, when he isn't wondering about Maria's new lover. Or he is simply irritated by her as she photographs yet another memorial: 'History is the whole trouble here, in this country, I could tell her, or its definition as a series of commemorative monuments. What about the "memorials" to forgetting, Maria?'

This is a rare moment, though, of positively felt critique. Otherwise the book revels in commodified, trash culture; the characters eat fast food at truck stops; they stay in cheap motels and watch bad television. The trouble with banality, finally, is that it is banal: 'I'm going to the bank. I'm depositing a cheque. I order a cheese roll. I cycle round the block. I try to mow the lawn.' And so on. Cohen does this sort of thing not because he's a bad writer — in fact, he hardly ever puts a word out of place — but because of a fascination with the banality of a commodified culture. Even when it's self-aware, though, this depiction of the banality of everyday life can be very hard work. The problem in *Hardly Beach Weather* is that the novel is too long and traditionally structured; the fable-moments are designed to lift it, but the effect of finding characters from Australian folklore and literature scattered about in the story is strangely bathetic. The irony just isn't working here. While it succeeded triumphantly in the fragmentary *Tourism*, it's at odds with what looks like an attempt at a big, serious novel. A consistently intelligent writer, Cohen might have outsmarted himself here. His big novel searches in vain for characters big enough to fit it.