

Geraldine Brooks, *Boyer Lectures 2011: The Idea of Home* (HarperCollins, 2011)

The fifty-second Boyer Lectures were written and presented by author and journalist Geraldine Brooks, and broadcast on ABC Radio National late in 2011. At the time of writing, the four lectures on the subject of *The Idea of Home* are still on the ABC website, both in transcript and as downloads (also via iTunes),¹ so you might want to save \$25 – a high price for such a small volume – and seek them out there rather than in your local book store. It is, of course, a subjective judgement, but I much prefer the written version, finding Brooks' voice too light and girlish and her delivery slow and drawling.

Brooks grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney, graduated from the University of Sydney and worked as a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* for three years before completing a Masters in Journalism at Columbia and then embarking on a career as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*. Her non-fiction titles, *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*, are informed by this stage of her career. All her novels have been bestsellers and she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *March* (2006); her latest title is *Caleb's Crossing*.

On the Radio National website, she proclaims herself to be 'more than a little in awe of being offered the opportunity to deliver the 2011 Boyer Lectures', but given her illustrious literary track record, why the awe? When the Miles Franklin longlist was released this month, first time author Favel Parrett found herself among more famous names in line for the award, and expressed similar sentiments: 'I feel a bit embarrassed,' she told the *SMH*. Enough of such female modesty. I'd be surprised if any male presenter of the Boyer Lectures has confessed to awe, and my goodness, there are a lot of them; since the lectures began in 1959, a mere six women have been granted the distinction (with another three as co-lecturers with men).

In the first lecture, Brooks takes the wide view of one's country as home, going in hard with an environmental message that was bred in her as a young journalist covering the campaign to save the Franklin River in the early 1980s. It turned her into an activist and was, she says, a 'source of conviction about our responsibility to our only home, this fragile and beleaguered planet.' Occasionally she reveals her expatriate status: 'Everyone knows the story of the first Plymouth Thanksgiving', she writes, as if every Australian has studied American history.

In Lecture Two, 'A Home on Bland Street', she writes of growing up amid the 'vast sprawl of red tiles and liver brick' that comprised Australian suburbia in the 1960s. Unlike apologists such as Patrick White, Barry Humphries and Dame Leonie Kramer, who 'did not grasp the emotional and imaginative richness of the lives played out against these frugal backdrops', Brooks views this as a wholly positive experience and praises the 'sustaining solidarity' and sense of community to be found in the suburbs. It's a refreshing take, and her affectionate portrait of home and family reminded me of the Adelaide novels of Barbara Hanrahan.

In lecture three, 'At Home in the World', Brooks discusses her life as a foreign correspondent, beginning with her involvement in the Sydney Olympics of 2000. Who knew she was a volunteer, 'a speck of highly costumed colour in the extravaganza of the opening ceremony'? All seemed well with the world that night, but before the Games had ended,

¹ www.abc.net.au/rn/boyerlectures

violence had broken out in Jerusalem and the next year the twin towers came down. 'We were back in our accustomed element: Endless enemies, infinite wars.'

The lectures are highly readable and all begin with a personal anecdote that engages the reader before widening into a more focused discussion. The first one begins with her observing the local wildlife in her garden in Martha's Vineyard; in the last, 'A Home in Fiction', in which she explains how she became a novelist, she's reluctantly attending a lecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is unexpectedly swept up by the mathematician's passion and vision. Although her field is words, not numbers, she concludes that 'Like that mathematician, I am after nothing less than eternal truths: what is this world, how can we more perfectly describe it? Who are we, who have we been?'

The book is dedicated to three journalist colleagues who lost their lives far from home: Americans Daniel Pearl, beheaded in Pakistan in 2002, and Gad Gross, murdered by Iraqi soldiers in 1991; and Australian Greg Shackleton, murdered in Balibo in 1975.

Ruth Starke