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This is the author's radio script of this article.

Adrian Hyland. *Gunshot Road*. Text, 2010.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 24 July 2010.

Three things that bothered me about Adrian Hyland's *Gunshot Road*:

1. The straitjacket of the thriller genre. The character of Emily Tempest, the new Aboriginal Community Police Officer at Bluebush, NT, is an original. Clever and observant, with a white father and black mother, this cigarette-smoking young woman has the right combination of local knowledge and western education to understand the disparate elements that make up outback life. But smart though she is, she constantly displays her courage by blundering recklessly into life-threatening situations. It's frustrating that what is basically a quirky, thoughtful novel is constrained by the imperative to include regular doses of sensation and conflict. She has the classic antagonistic relationship with her boss, a martinet who does things by the book and will have no truck with Emily's gut feelings. She's hospitalised after a serious attack and checks herself out early against medical advice. We know that, like a cartoon character, she's going to survive being bashed, blown up, shot at etc., but we have to go through all the suspense anyway. The reader (this one anyway) soon tires of this kind of manipulation. I'll give Hyland a tick for the unusual *deus ex machina* he uses to save Emily from her final ordeal, though.

2. The hardboiled discourse of the crime novel. Introducing her police colleagues, for example:

One was stocky, double-chinned, wore his belly like a weapon; he had an A-frame moustache and a head like a wild pig. The other was stringy, with red hair, blistered lips and an Adam's apple I could spot at twenty feet: a long, thin face like a blacksmith had laid it on an anvil and taken to it with a hammer. (11-12)

Or the church congregation:

A lemon-faced old puss sat next to me, poked me with a skinny finger and proffered her hymnal, insisted I sing. A woman with a bird's nest on her head and legs like a relief map of the Blue Mountains pumped the only organ she'd ever pump. (259)

Why, I wonder, are the ghosts of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett so hard to lay? Their brand of cynical, highly coloured language seems almost as much part of the genre as the predictable, though convoluted, plot. However, Hyland can write tenderly and movingly at times. The novel opens with a description of the women ceremonially singing the boys to their initiation ceremony:

You couldn't help but smile. The town mob: fractured and deracinated they might have been, torn apart by idleness and violence, by Hollywood and booze. But moments like these, when people came together, when they tried to recover the core, they gave you hope. It was the songs that did it: the women didn't so much sing them as pick them up like radio receivers. (2)

He doesn't romanticise the outback, but makes it pretty clear where his sympathies lie when it comes to a choice between patronising missionaries and multinational mining companies on the one hand and the Aborigines, eccentrics, oddballs and drunks who live around Gunshot Road, on the other.

3. The crossing of the gender boundary. I don't really know why this bothered me so much: it's common enough for a writer to use a first-person narrator of the opposite sex. Perhaps it was the two vivid sex scenes in particular – one violent and disturbing, one consensual and jokey – that I found hard to take, knowing they were written by a male author. It's more a vague unease than anything rational. I imagine that some Aboriginal people might feel similarly about a whitefella writing about their culture, albeit a fictionalised version, in the first person.

But *Gunshot Road* has too much going for it for the carping of one overcritical reviewer to hold it back. Emily Tempest is a memorable character, and the combination of warmth and acuteness in her assessments of the people she has dealings with make her very likeable. Unlike many fictional detectives, she's not a loner: her integration into her community makes her resilient as well as perceptive. It is Emily herself, rather than the preposterous plot, that keeps us reading this novel. *Gunshot Road* is the second Emily Tempest novel, and I'm sure many will be hoping it's not the last.