

Of Spies and Terrorists: Australian Fiction After 9/11¹

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Abstract

This article notes the powerful international impact of the attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001 and their literary aftermath. Beginning with *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the article considers literary responses to the events of 9/11 five or six years later by five Australian novelists. Their work ranges from fantastic satire to espionage thriller and psychological problem novel. A critical spirit informs each of these works – Andrew McGahan’s *Underground* (2006), Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), Janette Turner Hospital’s *Orpheus Lost* (2007), Adib Khan’s *Spiral Road* (2007) and Adrian d’Hage’s *The Beijing Conspiracy* (2007). Adib Khan’s novel *Spiral Road* is especially interesting for its examination of the dilemmas and difficulties faced by a Muslim Australian when he returns to his homeland Bangladesh. Like the other novels considered in this article, *Spiral Road* explores the clashes between political events and the realities of everyday living for individuals buffeted by the cross-winds of an American tragedy.

Keywords

Australian fiction, espionage, terrorism, politics, religion

Introduction

Wherever we were placed in the world, we saw the images and heard the rhetoric of September 11, 2001: the United States of America had been attacked on home soil, the world would never be the same again, a new paradigm now prevailed in international affairs. A defensive posture by the world’s sole superpower was seen

¹ First presented at EACLALS Conference, Venice, 25-29 March 2008; revised for *Asiatic*.

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by its leaders as insufficient: the best form of defence was attack, though it also included reductions to freedom of movement, belief and association.

The American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, supported by Britain, Australia and some European countries were contradictorily described as both pre-emptive and retaliatory and were bolstered by a rhetoric of freedom and democracy that has sounded increasingly hollow in the world at large. In no sense could either war be considered “clean,” though the conflict in Afghanistan had been supported in the UN and other international bodies. These new conditions of international conflict have produced massive increases in secret intelligence and covert operations in the Middle East and China as well as in the US and allied nations. In this post-Cold War epoch, the figure of the spy in literature has morphed into that of the terrorist and adopted protean shapes and forms.

This essay will consider some of these forms in recent Australian fiction but will pause a moment longer on the rhetoric and real-politik of September 11, 2001.

Despite its now well-documented difficulties and problems, the report of the 9/11 Commission provides a remarkably substantial and balanced analysis of the events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania on 11 September 2001 and what it calls “the new terrorism” from an American point of view. The report’s theme is counter-terrorism and the “global strategy” that is required to combat the threat of further terrorist attacks. Implicit throughout the report is the necessity to secure the freedom of the American people to live without the fear of further attacks.

The report’s focus is on the improvement of intelligence and counter-terrorism initiatives with special emphasis on al-Qaeda and Afghanistan. *New York Times* reporter Philip Shenon’s recent history of the 9/11 investigation vividly documents the personalities and problems behind the appointment of officers and the researching and writing of this report – including White House attempts to prevent access to relevant parts of the Presidential Daily Briefings. Some evidence was suppressed, including evidence of Saudi involvement in the terrorist attacks. But the overall success of the bipartisan Commission in establishing its independence and retaining its focus despite the many pressures applied to it deserves credit. *The 9/11 Commission Report* deserves a place in the literature of our times along with the more imaginative forms of poetry, drama, film and fiction that have responded to these changes in international affairs in the early twenty-first century. But what kinds of literary responses have occurred in other countries? In Australia, for instance? And what literary genres are employed – and adapted to their authors’ purposes?

Espionage and Terrorism in Literature

A largely unnoticed history of literary espionage and terrorism in books by Australian writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been brought to new

prominence by these violent events in the early twenty-first century. Not surprisingly, Japan, China, Germany and Russia have figured prominently in such narratives through the twentieth century. From a long way back, Australians have been watching others closely, reporting on them and trading in secret information, sometimes in exotic situations and locales (Bennett, "In the Shadows").

A more general question about genre is raised by such work. Are the serious literary novel and the espionage thriller Siamese twins or forever set apart? Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Greene's *Our Man in Havana* and Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* are considered literary "classics" but it is interesting that Greene called his novel an "entertainment" and both Conrad and Le Carre were hyper-aware of their popular audiences and commercial success. From the "thriller" side of this fence, we can sometimes see a complementary interest in features of "serious" literary espionage such as psychological complexity, interiority, questions of identity and dilemmas of conscience. But in Grisham, Forsyth and Furst, for instance, action, suspense, intrigues and puzzles are strongly laced with violent thrills and spills. The truth is that for writers who deal with characters playing both sides of the fence (that is, secret agents, spies and some terrorists), the temptation to write both serious literature *and* popular fiction is ever-present.

Australian Insurgents in the Terror Wars: *Underground*, *The Unknown Terrorist*, *Orpheus Lost*

Australian journalist David Marr recently accused Australian novelists of giving too little attention to "the urgent present" and failing to address "in worldly, adult ways the country and the time in which we live" (Goldsworthy 8). While this criticism fails to acknowledge the real insights into the present that can be made in novels set further back in history – such as Christopher Koch's novels that deal with secret intelligence in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and China – Marr's charge has drawn attention to the work of a number of younger writers who are shaping the contemporary Australian imagination. Such writers include Andrew McGahan, Richard Flanagan, Janette Turner Hospital and Adib Khan together with contributors to the "thriller" genre such as Adrian d'Hage.

Kerryn Goldsworthy has rightly described Andrew McGahan's novel *Underground* as fulfilling David Marr's wish for a novel that goes "straight for the throat" of contemporary Australia. McGahan's novel is set a few years in the future in about 2011. The novel's narrator is Leo James who writes his memoirs in the last few days of his life as he faces death by firing squad. Leo is the twin brother of Bernard James, the Prime Minister of Australia who takes over as the second prime minister after the recently departed John Howard and bears an uncanny resemblance to Australia's former Prime Minister. In his last days, Leo addresses his captors in a narrative which switches backwards and forwards across key events such as 9/11, the American President's visit to Australia in 2003, and events such as a televised

mushroom cloud over Canberra and an especially powerful Queensland cyclone which enabled Leo's temporary escape from his brother's anti-terrorist forces.

An especially clever aspect of this satiric novel is Leo's adventure with Aisha, a twenty-four year old member of the Great Southern Jihad who turns out to be Nancy Campbell, a University of Queensland Law graduate and daughter of an English professor: Nancy has been recruited to an al-Qaeda-related sleeper cell in Australia. She adheres to the "new Islam," which pays no attention to the Qur'an – which she hasn't read (like many Australian Marxists who had never read *Das Kapital*). The re-named Aisha believes that she and her fellow jihadists have destroyed Canberra but they are deceived by an elaborate hoax whereby Australia's capital has become a centre of world government run by the Americans; and she learns to her chagrin that her Great Southern Jihad has been created by American and Australian double agents.

An important member of the new world government in Canberra is Osama bin Laden who needs the Americans as much as they need him. The novel's final irony is Leo's imprisonment in the empty House of Representatives of Australia's Parliament which his jailer, Australia's Prime Minister, has always felt to be a place of imprisonment – "hemmed in by laws, constrained by the necessity for votes and debates and compromise" (298).

Underground combines narrative drive with satiric bite and, as a reviewer has noted, "the feral quality of good political cartooning" (Goldsworthy 9). In a succession of sharp scenes, McGahan shows a nation nuking itself – by allowing its government to use the terrorist crisis to imprison refugees, ban books and other forms of dissent and to introduce absurd tests of patriotism. The Bush White House offers a model of reckless adventurism and suppression of rights in the pursuit of freedom and Australia seems destined to follow, drawn on by "grey, corporate money... nervous and greedy for more" (*Underground* 157). Like the Roman empire, the American empire will assuredly collapse. But when the barbarians enter, will the institutions of civilisation already be dead?

Like *Underground*, Richard Flanagan's novel *The Unknown Terrorist* also attacks the jugular. Flanagan's protagonist, Gina Davies, is a pole dancer in a King's Cross nightclub who is swept into the public eye as "the unknown terrorist" after a series of accidents including a sexual encounter with a man called Tariq who is (wrongly) suspected of planting bombs at the Homebush Olympic Stadium in Sydney.

Flanagan's principal target is the Australian media whose journalists and their employers fall too readily for government propaganda and make their ratings-based reputations on vastly exaggerated projections of violent threats to people and property. At this point, I feel bound to assert that many Australian journalists, along with the great majority of government and secret intelligence service employees are driven by a sense of fair play and the need for reasonable and not excessive security

measures. Moreover, Australian courts, like many others in the world, have heard serious charges involving plans by individuals and groups associated with al-Qaeda to destroy public buildings and assassinate individuals. These are not myths or imaginings. The shadow of 9/11 hangs over many of these events. Attempting to gain perspective on such matters though, Australian High Court judge, Michael Kirby, remarked in 2007 that Americans were “obsessed” with September 11. “That is not an event that occurred in this country [Australia] and I think we have to keep our eye on the threat to Australia” (Merritt 2). For these comments, Kirby was roundly rebuked for his alleged lack of sympathy for 9/11 victims.

The Unknown Terrorist does not balk at these issues. Strangely, perhaps, Flanagan’s book has been praised more highly by American than Australian critics. In Texas, for example, the book was described as “a primer on the paranoia that is sweeping the world” (*The Austin Chronicle*) while the reviewer for the *New York Review of Books* remarks that “[Flanagan’s] methods name a callousness at loose in the world today, a luridness, and a widespread helplessness before them both. If only they were a product of his imagination.” *The Washington Post* compared Flanagan’s “tightly crafted narrative” to Kafka and Capote and described *The Unknown Terrorist* as a “disturbing gaze at the social and psychological mechanisms of terror.” (Reviews quoted in 2007 edition of novel.) In writing back so strongly to the imperial hubris that has shaped recent American foreign policy, Flanagan seems ironically to have enhanced his reputation in that country. *The Unknown Terrorist* has appealed to a reading public which is largely opposed to the war in Iraq and reductions in human rights at home; it also exemplifies a growing interest by Australian publishers in gaining a slice of the large American reading public for their works.

Janette Turner Hospital’s novel *Orpheus Lost* exhibits a deeply informed understanding of American military culture and its regional roots. Having lived and worked in South Carolina since 1999, Turner Hospital explores in this novel a regional culture that is both deeply religious and militaristic. A post-Civil War separatist sentiment and a heavy commitment to the National Guard is one of many paradoxes in the American South.

Turner Hospital’s protagonist, Leela, is the daughter of a Pentecostalist preacher. Leela grew up in the ironically named Promised Land in the American South, is a gifted mathematician and a student at Harvard University when she gets caught in the cross-fire of international terrorism. Leela’s search for her musical lover Mishka Bartok – an Australian of Hungarian Jewish and Lebanese extraction – plays variations on the Orpheus theme and incorporates some of the tragedy and loss of the mythical story.

I have written elsewhere that *Orpheus Lost* is in some respects the perfect post-September 11 novel because of the way it incorporates disparate elements within a satisfying aesthetic whole (Bennett, “Trans-national Challenges”). Like McGahan

and Flanagan, Turner Hospital adapts incidents and details from publicly reported events in the Iraq war but she also reveals considerable understanding of the workings of American secret intelligence and clandestine military operations, carrying these interests forward from her previous novel *Due Preparations for the Plague*.

Straddling Cultures: Adib Khan's *Spiral Road*

Like his protagonist Masud Alam in *Spiral Road*, the novelist Adib Khan was born and grew up in Bangladesh. He has lived and worked in Australia for more than thirty years. From the time of Adib Khan's principal character Masud's arrival at Dhaka airport to his fraught attempts to depart after spending some weeks with his family there after a long absence, Masud is haunted by the impact and influence of 9/11 on the subcontinent. Masud is shadowed during his return visit to Bangladesh by an Australian Secret Intelligence officer, Steven Mills, who suspects Masud of association with terrorists.

Yet Masud is also regarded with suspicion by Bangladeshi immigration officials, one of whom grills him about Australia and Australians: "Are Australians prejudiced against Muslims?" he is asked. "I'm an Australian. I'm not prejudiced against myself," Masud replies. But the official persists: "There's a difference between someone like you and the descendents of the British." Masud retorts: "There are people from all over the world living there." When he is asked, "Do Muslims feel threatened in Australia?" he replies, "You need to ask a practising Muslim" (14-15).

Masud's choice not to name any religion on his immigration form, though he was brought up Muslim, epitomises his problem in trying to straddle two countries in his mind and heart. For various reasons, he has learnt to distance himself from people in Australia and in his native Bangladesh for whose independence he had fought in 1971. Adib Khan presents his protagonist as a cool, somewhat remote individual afraid or unable to commit himself to a single person, country or cause. His reflections trace the lineaments of fear and desire of a sensitive and intelligent Asian-Australian immigrant.

The literal and metaphoric Spiral Road which Masud Alam travels during his return to family and friends in Manikpur, now part of Dhaka, takes him through the dangerous territory of secret wars that have flared up around the world since 11 September 2001. When Masud re-enters the family home, now much diminished since his childhood, his mother holds up the Qur'an in both hands muttering *surahs*, and he experiences a strong sense of "instant purgation" (51). Yet he tells the family that he is not a practising Muslim anymore. His main concern is for the global environment and he has joined the Greens in Australia (59). Masud's extended family have different responses to 9/11 and its consequences. His Uncle Rafiq, for instance, argues that flying the two planes into the towers was "a symbol, a gesture

of rage, frustration, attention-seeking... A statement to say that if you continue to humiliate us, we will find devastating ways to retaliate" (62). Masud angrily retorts that innocent people were killed, this is not symbolism but murder (62). But the uncle is not so easily dismissed: "Aren't innocent lives lost in Palestine? Isn't that murder?... A moral stand is not the sole right of white nations" (63).

Spiral Road explores with considerable finesse the ways in which the iconic figure of Masud is torn by competing claims on his mind and feelings. He is most deeply affected by the sight of his admired father reduced to a state of puerile dependency by Alzheimer's and his loyal mother struggling to cope. But hero-worship is stripped away in this novel. When Masud discovers his father's hidden diaries they reveal his secret affair with another woman and the existence of their love-child. From this emerges a truer picture of Masud's father whom he now recognises as "deceitful, cunning... impulsive. But my father nonetheless" (315).

The struggle for personal freedom in Adib Khan's novel, as in much of Naipaul's work, involves a process of disenchantment – a stripping of illusions. Yet the necessity of ideals is also revealed in the lives of Masud himself as a young man in the 1970s and in his favourite nephew Omar who, Masud discovers, is involved in a secret cell operating a training camp for Islamic "freedom fighters" in the remote borderlands of Bangladesh. Masud gets caught up in his nephew's new version of fighting for "freedom" – in small, secret, mobile cells training Bangladeshis and Arabs in acts of sabotage and murder on Western targets. There are continuities here with the motives and methods of those, like Masud, who fought the Pakistani forces to ensure the independence of Bangladesh. Stealth and secrecy are still the *modus operandi*. But when Omar and his cell try to recruit Masud to their cause they find he is unrecruitable – and therefore dangerous to them. His previous experiences in raids and killings during the independence struggles together with his time in Australia have rendered him incapable of supporting the cause of these young men. Although he looks like promising material to both the Australian secret service and to al-Qaeda, he can serve neither cause. Masud's refusal to cooperate with his nephew and his cell has fatal consequences for Omar whose hero-worship has distorted his view of his uncle.

The psychological complications of *Spiral Road* are finely tuned and the reader is drawn into the reasons for Masud's emotional disengagement. Both Jane Austen and the Qur'an are part of his inheritance. Can they be integrated in any satisfying way? Is Australia a lifeline? Having resisted recruitment to the Australian government's cause in the "war on terror," Masud is accused by religious zealots in the streets of Dhaka of spying on a mullah who was giving a speech at the bazaar. Masud narrowly escapes a beating or worse and reflects ironically that similar scenes of prejudice and violence could be experienced at any airport in America:

Seeing my Muslim name, immigration officials would want to know the motives for my visit, although the Australian passport would probably lessen suspicion. Here (in Bangladesh) it's my name that suppresses hostility, but being an Australian isn't an advantage. I am a resident of a Christian country, they remind me, mostly inhabited by whites. Cousins of the Americans and the British. They invaded Islamic countries. They all speak English. (174)

Spiral Road explores complex issues of patriotism, loyalty and identity. In his most revealing discussion with the Australian spy, Steven Mills, Masud is puzzled at the Australian's apparent inability to understand "cultural divides and the lives of those who are compelled to defy them" (241). At this stage, Masud thinks his family is his first (and perhaps only) priority – a position which modifies somewhat later. As for loyalty to country, he observes that he is "neither a traitor nor a blind patriot," which draws from the Australian the ironic comment that "a safe occupation of the middle ground is so common to migrants" (241). The ripostes continue. Masud asks if Steven would be happier if he broke out regularly into a heartfelt rendition of "Advance Australia Fair." Mills says he'd prefer "Waltzing Matilda," before the discussion moves to more strategic issues.

Of the many moral and emotional issues facing Masud Alam, the most difficult one is whether to betray his nephew Omar for whom he is now prepared to drop all euphemisms and call a terrorist. Which is more reprehensible, he asks, silence or betrayal? (325). Should Masud tell his brother, Omar's father, in the first instance, that his son is a terrorist? While thinking he should not, he effectively does this. Unfortunately, the truth does not make everyone free when loyalties become so tangled; and Omar meets his violent end protecting Masud, the uncle he wrongly believed would support the new generation's violent struggle for what they perceive as freedom.

A "Higher Thriller": *The Beijing Conspiracy*

In contrast to *Spiral Road*, Adrian d'Hage's novel *The Beijing Conspiracy* foregrounds direct action, conspiracy and violent conflict. The novel's plot concerns the planning and execution of a series of warning attacks against Western and Chinese targets by al-Qaeda related cells culminating in the "final solution" – a new version of the Holocaust – to be achieved at the Beijing Olympic Games. The novel earns the accolade of a "higher thriller" because of its astute incorporation of scientific, political, military and religious knowledge into its plot.

The author's experience is brought to bear on this novel. Adrian d'Hage is a highly educated, well-informed former member of the Australian Army who served in Intelligence before being transferred to Infantry where he earned a Military Cross for action in Vietnam. He was later head of Defence Planning for security of the Sydney Olympics including chemical, biological and nuclear threats. Unusually, he is a student of religion who says he commenced his honours degree in theology as a

committed Christian and graduated “of no fixed religion” (biographical note in novel). His Ph.D. at the Australian National University is on the influence of religion on US foreign policy in the Middle East.

While *The Beijing Conspiracy* exhibits less interest in the psychological adjustments of individuals involved in the secret wars of our times than Adib Khan’s *Spiral Road*, *The Beijing Conspiracy* creates some horrific scenarios of where these wars may lead. The novel’s plausibility is enhanced by the author’s embedded knowledge of military intelligence, contemporary politics, religion and the media.

The villains and heroes in *The Beijing Conspiracy* are neatly counterpointed. The chief villains are Amon al-Falid, an American-educated Egyptian whose vision splendid is of the US, Britain, Australia and all Western countries being defeated and operating under strict Sharia law (72-73); he is matched for villainy by an American evangelical Christian, Richard Halliwell, who uses his massive pharmaceutical company and his influence with an American president uncannily like George W. Bush to develop biological weapons to use in the desperate “last days” that Halliwell and his Christian right evangelical friends see as their times (130). On the side of the angels are a feisty Australian microbiologist, Dr. Kath Braithwaite, her boss Professor Imran Sayed – an outstanding scientist and a moderate Muslim – and a tough, independent and charming CIA officer, Curtis O’Connor. Together, these three prevent “the final solution” in Beijing but only after a “first warning” attack of devastating proportions on Sydney – presented in graphic chapters which show the fruits of the author’s actual pre-planning for defence of the Sydney Olympics against terrorist attacks.

Excessive religious zeal underlies much of the evil portrayed in *The Beijing Conspiracy*. Even Kath Braithwaite’s ex-husband was an Australian Christian neo-con. But Kath has had the courage and good fortune to leave him behind. A far more lethal influence is the Christian right in North America epitomised in the loathsome Richard Halliwell. On the other side, the suicide bombers of Sydney are Islamic zealots as are their leaders in Islamic China and the Middle East. D’Hage seems not to accept the Huntington thesis of an inevitable clash between Christian and Islamic civilisations. Rather, he recognises that highly motivated political forces are conspiring to defeat the moderates and liberals across the world.

One of the secrets of d’Hage’s popular appeal is his ability to make apparently far-fetched scenarios read like extensions of yesterday’s news. When the American president is shot down by missiles over Canberra while visiting Australia after al-Qaeda’s “first warning” attacks on Sydney, he is succeeded by a Vice-President with many of the unfortunate hallmarks of Dick Cheney. The corrupt links between the White House and the pharmaceutical industry in this novel echo charges of similar corrupt links between government in the US and the armaments and private security industries. The novel is a reminder that many of the horrors of the past five

years in Iraq and elsewhere exceed what might have been imagined – Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and rendition to name just a few. In this context, the excesses of *The Beijing Conspiracy* may seem merely truthful to today's readers.

Conclusion

This essay began with *The 9/11 Commission Report* which famously charged American intelligence analysts with deficient imagination when they failed to “connect the dots” that would have led to prediction and pre-empting of the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001. Attempts to bureaucratise the imagination, as proposed by the Commission, may not however be the best way to freely imagine what could, might or probably will happen in the next few years as a result of those events and the forces unleashed in response to them. Intelligence analysts, as well as a broader public, should be urged to read what we call fiction as well as traditional forms of reporting.

Brief consideration of five novels by Australian writers – all published in 2006 and 2007 – show a range of imaginative responses and literary techniques revealing these writers grappling with the implications of their country's involvement in the oddly misnamed, apparently never-ending “war on terror.” If that is an actual war, these novels suggest that it is being lost.

McGahan, Flanagan, Turner Hospital, Khan and d'Hage all demonstrate a close and welcome engagement with a period of major upheaval in world affairs. All five reveal critical perspectives and imagine vivid scenes, characters and situations. Significantly, while indicating political weakness and lack of leadership and independent judgment, they together reveal Australia as a country of increasingly complex trans-national individuals and stories. Because stealth and secrecy are hallmarks of the burgeoning activity in espionage and terrorism, it behoves us to read and discuss this new fiction with a view to better imagining and interpreting the clandestine conflicts of our time.

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