

**Ron Blaber, ed. “Whaddaya Know?”: Writings for Syd Harrex. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2015. 183 pp. ISBN 9781743053409.**

Sydney Church Harrex died in Adelaide on 29 May 2015, and since then former colleagues and students from many parts of the world have written many words in commemoration of this truly pioneering and influential scholar and teacher. In June 2015, *Asiatic* featured an article on his poetry and nine short reminiscences. *Transnational Literature*, the journal which grew from origins in his Centre for Research in New Literatures in English (CRNLE) at Flinders University, South Australia, included five prose tributes and six in poetry in the November 2015 issue, and is planning a special feature on his work and areas of interest in a later issue.

However, Syd’s admirers didn’t wait for his death to plan celebrations and commemorations of his life and work. Although only launched in late 2015, “Whaddaya Know?” has apparently been in the planning for some years. Even without my personal knowledge of this fact, I could have picked it up from the note to Reza Haque’s playful poem “The Postcolonial Condition,” which advises that “The poem has been accepted for publication in *Transnational Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 1.” That issue of the journal was published in November 2012.

The editor of this new book, Ron Blaber, is a graduate of Flinders University’s English Department and begins his introduction, titled “Whaddaya Know?,” by explaining the title he has chosen:

One should not really explain humour or jokes but the title of this collection does require some comment. The question ‘Whaddaya know?’ was a common utterance in the corridors and staff room of the Humanities buildings when I was doctoral student in the English Department at Flinders University.... The question functioned phatically in much the same way as ‘How’r’ ya goin?’ or ‘G’day’: it was part of everyone’s every day. (1)

The response, in a typical display of Australian jokiness, usually consisted of “fuck all,” or “bugger all” (meaning “nothing,” or “very little”), followed by a laugh. This kind of exchange, as Blaber points out, was

telling... and perhaps seems trivial but it signified a collegiality and, paradoxically, an understanding that we really didn’t know anything much – at least at one level. That was why we [were] there: pursuing research in what were then regarded as marginal or peripheral fields of investigation. (1)

One might also remark that this common greeting among these scholars is in a way paradoxical in its cultural specificity to the masculine Australian milieu of a

particular time, given the breadth and inclusiveness of their studies – including literature written in English from virtually anywhere and by people of any cultural background. Syd was at once a man of his own time and place – a proud Tasmanian, culturally Anglo-Australian – and a citizen of the world, interested in literatures and cultures from Trinidad to Tonga. His own speciality was Indian literature but he was anything but exclusive in his enthusiasms. Syd called the field of study that he and his students were engaged in “new literatures in English,” preferring that more inclusive term to the more commonly used “postcolonial literature” or “commonwealth literature.” In his brief introduction Blaber discusses the origin and use of the term in some detail, linking it with Syd’s own creative and critical practice. He goes on to give a short account of CRNLE and the *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, and discusses quotations from three of Syd’s published critical works. What I felt was missing in the introduction was some explanation of what was to come: the origins of the project, the nature of the invitation to contribute and the relationships of the authors to Syd. Sometimes, but by no means always, is this made clear within the individual piece, or in the Notes on Contributors at the end. In the Acknowledgements we are informed that several of the pieces have been previously published but for only some of them are publication details provided. Extracts from CRNLE publications are included, but no bibliographical references to the original publications are provided. This absence of supporting editorial structure detracts from the book’s value both as a work of scholarship and as a celebration and appreciation of Syd’s life and work. Another note here and I will have done with negativity: the book contains an unfortunate number of typographical errors. Some are more than just misspelt words and they interfere with the reader’s comprehension to a distracting and irritating degree.

The contributions to the book under review only make sense if one understands the nature of Syd’s engagement with the writings of the world. As the project was begun some years ago, it was presumably intended to be presented to Syd as a *festschrift*, although that rather solemn term hardly comes near describing the eclectic variety on offer in this book. Poems and essay-memoirs reflecting on anything from visits to nightclubs and all-night drinking sessions to the essence of poetry and criticism jostle against short stories, theatre and book reviews, and academic papers on literature from Australia, India and the British Isles – in short, just the kind of melange Syd himself would have delighted in. The absence of any of his own work among the collected pieces might be explained by this original intention as it is not usual to include works of the celebrated author among the tributes.

So, following the introduction, we have 21 varied items. They begin with Rick Hosking’s short reminiscence, including inimitable anecdotes of his travels with Syd: a moving and irreverent memoir of “Sydji Harrex: teacher, colleague,

scholar, researcher, mate” (12). Another early colleague at Flinders, Brian Matthews, also offers a reminiscence of “A Night Out in Sachsenhasen” with a group of conference-goers liberated after five days of EACLALS in Frankfurt. Matthews recalls “a conversation of extreme seriousness” between Syd, himself and a couple of others; “unquestionably... one of *the* important conversations of my life. Though I can’t actually recall what exactly it was about and what finally we decided” (172). This quirky short memoir (previously published, but where?) is the penultimate piece in the book, followed only by Adrian Caesar’s superb poem, “The Trespasser”:

‘All poetry is trespass,’ you said,  
So I leapt over your fence with words  
Into the fields of youth again... (176)

A fitting conclusion, this eloquent tribute to both Syd and to poetry.

Seven other of the contributions are in the form of poetry of one kind or another. Reza Haque, who is listed among the contributors as a PhD candidate at Flinders but whose doctorate was finished a couple of years ago and who is now based back in Bangladesh, makes an amusing play on the prefix “post” in “The Postcolonial Condition.” Trevor Fennell, a former Professor in the French Department at Flinders, contributes a couple of limericks pregnant with in-jokes. Paul Sharrad, a former student, offers “A Sort of Sequence for Syd,” four evocative and deeply personal poems. New Zealand poet Vincent O’Sullivan wryly recalls a night out with Syd at “Olga’s... whose staff wore ‘night attire’” and where “there was no irony much... What you saw was what you didn’t get” (68). Kirpal Singh, a Singapore-based academic and member of Syd’s worldwide networks of collegial friends, also writes a verse-memoir, reminiscing about happy times spent together during overseas visits. Anne Brewster, another former student of Syd’s, now at the University of NSW, writes a short prose poem titled “The Heart,” with no explicit reference to Syd or “new literatures” but very much in his questing vein, mingling the intellect and the emotions. Sudesh Mishra, another former student, now at the University of the South Pacific, contributes a magnificent piece titled “Odysseus, My Father,” once again, apparently only obliquely related to Syd – a powerful imagining of a modern-day Ulysses, in a scant page of poetic prose.

Syd’s old friend Satendra Nandan, now at the University of Canberra but formerly from Fiji, like Sudesh and some of Syd’s other students, contributes a colourful short story of Fiji village life, “The Burial” – once again, previously published but who can say where? Flinders Drama lecturer Murray Bramwell’s offering is made up of a selection from his many fine contributions to the *Adelaide Review* and other publications – theatre, music and book reviews.

Three reviews from the *CRNLE Reviews Journal* by Yasmine Gooneratne, Alamgir Hashmi and Vin Buckley, were chosen for inclusion, plus a substantial essay by Dorothy Jones on the Indian writer Kamala Das. This essay was first published in 1986 in Volume One of the CRNLE Writers series, although this information is not provided in the book.

The remaining five items are substantial works of literary scholarship. Ron Shapiro's essay on "The Darville/Demidenko Affair" was first published in *Westerly*, but the other four appear to be new work previously unpublished. Graham Tulloch, Syd's former colleague in English at Flinders, combines a Tasmanian theme with his abiding interest in Walter Scott by exploring an obscure corner of literary history – Scott's fascination with a celebrated Tasmanian bushranger who might have partly inspired a character in one of his minor stories. Sue Hosking from Adelaide University, who met her husband Rick in Syd's early classes at Flinders, also contributes an intriguing Tasmanian story, examining the letters between a prominent Tasmanian colonist and his long-suffering wife. Julian Croft's essay is on Australian poet Kenneth Slessor's work as a war correspondent during the Second World War and the effect of various personal and historical circumstances on the writing of his poem "Beach Burial."

Lastly, the editor himself, Ron Blaber, includes an essay of his own titled "Static or Grunge Revisited," which looks at recent "grunge" novels from Britain and Australia – and in its very distance from anything Syd himself would have undertaken demonstrates the radical kind of mentoring that Syd provided. I was one of Syd's students in the mid-1990s. It was at his suggestion that I submitted my first piece of literary scholarship for publication. It was an essay from one of his Honours classes in Indian literature which I would never have thought of publishing if it weren't for his practical mentoring – he told me it was worth publishing, and who might publish it. Certainly that essay was within his range of interests, but I later went on to publish on all sorts of topics outside that range and Syd was always ready to celebrate, to commiserate and to offer the kind of collegial support which has inspired so many of his former students and friends to provide their invaluable gifts of words for this book and the other publications honouring him.

One esteemed former colleague, Professor Helen Tiffin, formerly of the University of Tasmania, chose not to use words to express her appreciation. Her contribution, as may be discovered in small print on the back cover, is the glowing, jewel-like cover illustration, a suite of paintings titled "Penneshaw Dreaming." Penneshaw is the small town on Kangaroo Island where Syd and his wife Jane had a holiday house, and where several celebrated intimate but truly international conferences were held. There is something extraordinarily moving in this eminent international postcolonial scholar taking up the paintbrush rather than the pen to send her greetings to her beloved colleague. I

ferverently hope that he was able to see the painting, and understand the sincerity of the regard in which he was held by all these creative and scholarly friends, before he left us in May last year.

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