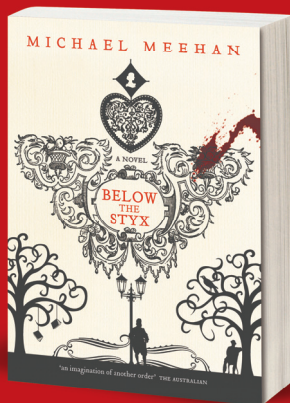


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set the infernal thing—the
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Patrick Allington

BOYER LECTURES: A VERY
AUSTRALIAN CONVERSATION
by Peter Cosgrove

ABC Books
\$24.99 pb, 112 pp, 9780733328077

Each year, the board of the Australian Broadcasting Commission invites a prominent Australian to present the Boyer Lectures. The chosen expert offers his or her (mostly his) 'ideas on major social, scientific or cultural issues' to a radio audience and, a little later, to readers.

Unsurprisingly, a review of the Boyers' fifty-year history reveals undulations in quality and significance. While the concept has produced plenty of thought-provoking and prescient moments, often the interest is of a transient or an introductory nature. Certainly, few lecturers have matched the resonant and seminal contribution of W.E.H. Stanner's *After the Dreaming* (1968), one of the finest pieces of writing produced about indigenous relations in Australia. Sometimes the choice of lecturer has been perplexing. In 2008, Rupert Murdoch's *A Golden Age of Freedom* mixed rapacious optimism about technology, globalisation and the future of the news media with a tetchy plea for Australia to shrug off its complacency. It would be hard to think of a person who needs the resources of a public broadcaster to disseminate his vision of the world less than Murdoch does.

The 2009 Boyer Lectures, delivered by former head of the Armed Forces General Peter Cosgrove, are perplexing for different reasons. On the face of it, Cosgrove is a fine choice, even if these days he sometimes comes across as a proxy governor-general or as some kind of Grandfather to the Nation. His experience, leadership qualities and record of achievement – notably as commander of INTERFET during East Timor's transition to independence – are matched by an overtly

egalitarian spirit, a genial, even gentle public persona and silky-smooth communication skills. More broadly, Cosgrove seems an apt choice because in Australia we have become expert at averting our collective gaze from recent wars that have been, and are being, fought in our name. While we should be grateful that the military does not dominate politics in the way it does in many other countries, we all benefit when an ex-soldier chooses to speak out about war, peace and Australia's place in a violent world.

But *A Very Australian Conversation* is a frustrating book, in turn flimsy and listless. Cosgrove declares himself to be an 'Everyman' and sets about the task of detailing what an everyday Aussie bloke is worried about. As Cosgrove said in his recent Australia Day address, 'I have had a wealth of opinions on things large and small which are significant to me about our Australian way of life. In accepting to do the Boyer lectures I had to crystallise many of those opinions ... a sort of "put up or shut up" opportunity!'

In this explanation lies the book's central problem: Cosgrove has attempted to cover so many issues and ideas that his finished product seems more like an annotated list. Apart from national security – 'my knitting', as Cosgrove cutely calls it – he writes about 'Australia's regional relationships, leadership the Australian way, on sociological changes I have observed over my lifetime, and on those great political issues which I think resonate with the Common Man (like me!)'. As such, he discusses the Australia–United States alliance, 'wars of choice', how to be a good international citizen, the importance of 'the national interest', the Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars, Australia's relations with Indonesia, the Pacific, China and New Zealand, leadership in the context of business, politics and the media, the Cold War and Australia, Muslim relations in Australia, the internationalisation of Australia, and so on.

By stretching himself so thin – the published Boyers amount to six brief chapters – Cosgrove's commentary is unavoidably superficial. This inadvertently causes his conversational, matey tone to come across not so much as

rough-hewed eloquence but more as something of a hedge, as if the reasonableness of his tone is its own evidence (something even more pronounced in the broadcast version). There are moments of bluntness and even flashes of anger, as when Cosgrove condemns the leaders of the Vietnam War protest movement for their treatment of soldiers (elsewhere he acknowledges the dubious rationale of the war itself). But he leaps from topic to topic with such haste that he forgoes the need to properly argue his case. He opposes a Bill of Rights because politicians make 'lousy judges' and judges make 'lousy politicians'. He equates the science of climate change with interpreting military intelligence: 'fact-based but leading from there with a series of assumptions to a future scenario upon which in all prudence we should base actions now and in the future.' It's an intriguing comparison, but his commentary is vague, and his subsequent pitch for nuclear power as a commonsense solution is an awkward sell.

At other times, diplomatic niceties intrude. When Cosgrove was head of INTERFET in East Timor, his stringent commitment to being even-handed and respectful towards all parties clearly formed a compelling part of his ability to help keep the peace. But as a public figure, his continuing veneer of officialdom seems out of place. He worries about Fiji's 'coup culture', but feels obliged to remind us that it is 'a nation of fine and friendly people'. He describes Papua New Guinea as 'needy and fragile in the robustness and reach of its instruments of government', but only after noting that it is 'proudly sovereign and wonderfully rich in culture and history and natural beauty'. When speaking about China, he seems reluctant to say 'Tibet': 'Although some may point to its suzerainty over time of some of its peripheral territories, it has never been a wider regional hegemon.'

It is not that *A Very Australian Conversation* lacks an overriding theme or agenda. In professing a dedication to the maintenance of mainstream values, rights and responsibilities, Cosgrove lauds Australia's enduring democracy and reminds us of the importance of

political stability. He quotes Donald Horne's claim that 'Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share in its luck', in order to disagree: 'I would rather turn that around and say that the period spawned a wealth of intellectuals with impressive minds like that of Horne, ready to challenge our self-assuredness at the same time as they so ably demonstrated it!' While Cosgrove's bottom line is that democracy should be protected and maintained, his glass-near-full perspective seems to discount the vital role of rigorous – sometimes even rancorous or wrong-headed – dissent as a legitimate, vital and penetrating part of mainstream Australia's enduring stability and evolution.

It is difficult to believe that *A Very Australian Conversation* represents the ABC's preferred template for future Boyer Lectures, unless the priority is on the public figure, irrespective of what that person chooses to talk about. Ironically, though, it is hard to know whether to question the ABC board's judgment in choosing Cosgrove or to suggest they ask him back for another go in 2010. On the evidence of these lectures, Cosgrove has much to contribute to Australia's national debate.

He could, for example, reflect on the future of the Australia–Indonesia relationship, using his experience in East Timor as the basis for a more wide-ranging discussion. Or he could interrogate the vexing, elusive concept of the Australian 'national interest', its importance and possible misuse, especially in wartime and using Vietnam or Afghanistan as examples. Or he could examine what makes a great leader, focusing on the differences between military and civilian leadership, including an expanded discussion on his belief that a lack or failure of integrity 'is the most egregious, the most fatal' deficiency an Australian leader can possess. But in touching on all of these topics, and so much more, *A Very Australian Conversation* is a largely forgettable, unpersuasive and limp collection of underdeveloped thoughts. ■

Patrick Allington's novel, *Figurehead*, was reviewed in the October 2009 *ABR*.

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

by Wendy James

UWA Publishing

\$32.95 pb, 250 pp, 9781921401466

Set in Sydney, Wendy James's third novel, *Where Have You Been?*, an intriguing story of family, loss, memory and identity, is just as compelling as her previous ones, *Out of the Silence* (2005) and *The Steele Diaries* (2008).

After Susan Middleton's mother dies, a woman appears, claiming to be Susan's long-lost sister Karen, now known as Carly. Karen disappeared more than twenty years earlier on the night of her high-school formal; now, in light of a potentially lucrative inheritance, it seems she's back. Street-smart and tough, Carly insinuates herself into the Middleton's lives with relative ease. But is she who she claims to be?

Where Have You Been? is divided into three parts, each containing numerous shorter sections written from Susan, Carly and Ed's perspectives. Their voices are distinct, and the richly layered text warrants re-reading. James has a keen eye for detail. Her exploration of the gradual splintering effect of the enigmatic Carly's appearance on the otherwise smooth 'happily-ever-after' suburban life led by Susan, her husband and their two children is absorbing.

As the novel progresses, there is an increasing sense of shadowy menace and uncertainty. Ultimately, while the dénouement is satisfyingly unexpected, there are no simple answers to be found here. The tantalising conclusion seems to raise just as many questions as it appears to answer. As Carly reflects towards the end of *Where Have You Been?*: 'She likes to save the best till last. She eats all her vegetables first, chews them fast, then savours the steak. Stories are like that too, she thinks. The climax needs to be held back, held tight, delayed until the optimum moment ... But it's a mistake to think that the climax is ever the end.'

Amy Baillieu