

Prickles of disquiet

Tales from the prolific Peter Goldsworthy

Murray Waldren

GRAVEL

by Peter Goldsworthy

Hamish Hamilton, \$29.95 pb, 264 pp, 9781926428192

Peter Goldsworthy justly commands a seat at the big table in the Australian hall of literary achievement. This was underlined on Australia Day with his gonging as a Member of the Order of Australia for service as an author and poet. It is a prize that should glitter comfortably on the mantelpiece alongside the likes of his South Australian Premier's Award, his Commonwealth Poetry Prize, his Bicentennial Literary Prize for Poetry and his FAW Christina Stead Award for fiction.

For someone who has practised half-time as a writer and half-time as a GP for the past thirty-five years, his output is admirably prolific: eight novels, including one co-written with Brian Matthews, five collections of short stories, half a dozen poetry collections, two novels adapted as plays, two opera libretti and a spot of essayistic *Navel Gazing* (1998). He has also done time on literature's administrative front line, his committee stints including four and a half years as chairman of the Australia Council's Literature Board. All of which mark him out as a *littérateur* of the first order.

His last book, *Everything I Knew* (2008), divided critics but was short-listed for last year's Prime Minister's Literary Awards. For Goldsworthy, it was a feisty return to the rite-of-passage territory of his much-praised first novel *Maestro* (1989), observed with the same astute eye but grittier, anchored more in the organic awkwardness of adolescence and its arrogant hedonism than in loftier cultural aspirations. As with almost all of his work, there was a sting in the tale and a touch of trans-

gression at its heart.

Unsurprisingly, both the unexpected and the transgressive figure in his latest publication, if in subtle ways. Goldsworthy has aggregated eight stories under the title *Gravel*, and the collection's pedigree is strong, with half of the pieces in it having already been anthologised in *Best Australian Stories* selections. The clunky title is significant: for most of us, gravel is road or pathway material, rock fragments bigger than sand and smaller than boulders. Medicos, however, know gravel as sand-like concretions that form in the biliary and urinary tracts and become irritants. Less commonly, to gravel means to perplex or embarrass, with the added connotation, in the United States, of being uncongenial. All nuances apply to this collection.

Goldsworthy's friend and fellow man of letters Barry Oakley noted once that there is nothing inherently intimidating about either a scientist or a writer, 'but someone who has *both* sides of the brain so highly developed, they're the ones to watch'. As this book's cover image suggests, gravel can get under the skin. Yet it's worth remembering that, if its rash leaves us with raw spots that ache for a while, it seldom scars permanently.

A true believer throughout his career in the glory of the short story, Goldsworthy has championed the art during its vacillations in public favour. And he has returned to it time and again, despite the distractions of poetry, the novel and lately the theatre. He is a sucker for the power of pithiness, particularly if there's a scintilla of subversion in the mix. And he knows that

the ordinary can be rendered extraordinary in the hands of a William Boyd, say, or a John McGahern. Or even, as proved here, a Peter Goldsworthy.

Compelling yet challenging, the pieces in *Gravel* deal with various forms of irritants that exasperate and even persecute us; some are concealed, some are manifest; some stalk our dreams, others are prickles of disquiet. The protagonists in the stories, three of which run to more than forty pages each, are discomforted by things outside their normal experiences or usual sense of self. Complacencies come under attack; convictions are threatened. Sometimes it's through an idea, sometimes by an unexpected behaviour or emotional overload. Often the threat lies in the seduction of indiscretion. The characters find themselves lured outside their comfort zones into areas that leave them grappling with self-doubt, indignity, duplicity, bemusement or even comical exposure.

Generally in his short fiction, Goldsworthy's purview is largely urban, whether the outer suburbs, where comfort compensates for exciting times, or the inner city, where trendiness and expensive toys measure self-worth. He has sympathy for the deprived, but no mercy for the abusers of privilege. His characters can be adolescents yearning to escape perceived stultification, or professionals smug in brand-name lives and dot-point peccadilloes, or stay-at-home mums avoiding empty-eyed reflections in kitchen windows.

His writing is so deceptively easy that it reels readers in before they are aware of it. There are no stylistic fireworks, no false haste, no wasted words; equally, there is no sense of over-compression. We are given first-person insight into a life, a situation, a flux of emotions, until at some point quietude becomes disquiet and Goldsworthy unravels the 'what next' with forensic skill. Or merciless dissection. Along the way, he slyly examines preconceptions and moral certainties.

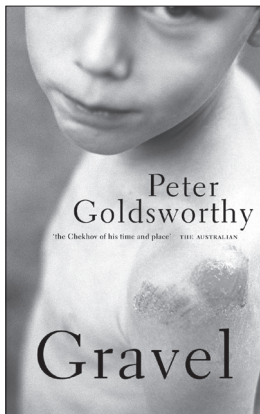
Of the stories in this collection, 'Shooting the Dog' and 'The Bet' (first published in *ABR*) are the most viscerally confronting, with endings that disturb sensitivities. 'Shooting the

Dog' is especially haunting, a treatment where the emotional gravel needs to be tweezered out afterwards with surgical care.

All the other pieces have a sex'n'sin edginess to them: transgression is hinted at or considered, or practised with enthusiasm. Standouts for me were 'The Fourth Tenor', where an Adelaide wife's self-belief is tested by a bizarre audition, and 'The Formal', a kind of reverse *Lolita* with pike and disturbing degrees of difficulty. Least convincing is 'Get a Life', which investigates stalking but verges on the languid. Not that it's bad; it is just that it suffers in comparison with the adroit achievements of the others. These stories are by turns droll, dark and poignant – and addictive.

For all his accomplishments, Goldsworthy sometimes gets a bad press because he has cloaked much of his work with irony and black humour, or because his novels can be shot through with nostalgia or can focus on contemporary trivialities. This means his deftness can be misconstrued as frivolity and his serious intent can become obscured by whimsy. Yet in his fiction, he has said, he is always looking to deliver 'the shock of recognition', that seismic jolt that works of clarity and compassion can deliver. It is an ambition he fulfils in *Gravel*.

This collection is best supped quietly with a ragout of receptivity – it is a subtle blend, with a lingering aftertaste. ■



Murray Waldren's latest book is *The Mind and Times of Reg Mombassa* (2009).

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