

I had yearned for my entire life'. Such poetic commentary facilitates a lively story, even if it is not always clear where the interviewee's voice becomes transposed with the author's rich interpretations.

The book's motif, with its spectacular cover image, is finding 'the heart of the nation', symbolised by Uluru as the geographic 'heart' of the continent. Those without Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ancestry are not included among the interviewees, but the journey towards 'voice, treaty and truth' is presented as an urgent goal for all. Surely the invitation 'to join us', 'to walk with us', will be persuasive for many, whether those whose forebears have been in Australia for generations or more recently arrived migrants. The message, however, is not without complication. Describing federal parliament as occupying 'a hill that was stolen from the Ngunnawal people' will stoke discomfort and uncertainty for some, and risk resentment among Australians who remain proud of the history of European settlement.

The message of inclusiveness which is present in parts of Mayor's book is important: 'we can only find the heart of the nation together'. Unavoidably this invitation also sits alongside repeated renditions of negative and at times brutal experiences suffered among Indigenous forebears. On the one hand, a senior Yolngu man is quoted as saying that 'our ancestors' we sing to 'are your ancestors too', but we also encounter the categorical distinction between those with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ancestry and others who are envisaged as remaining always 'non-Indigenous'. Indeed, a sharp difference is implied between 'modern times' and 'the old ways', the latter presented as 'the most peaceful culture with unsurpassed longevity' and 'a model of harmonious coexistence', these propositions risking romanticisation that ignores the flaws and discontinuities exhibited by all societies over time.

Finding the Heart of the Nation deserves to be read widely and the issues it raises addressed across the diverse sectors of Australian society. The energy with which the author has propounded his commitment to Indigenous rights

and advancement is impressive. Further details as to how improved life outcomes for Indigenous people will arise from the Uluru Statement proposals will doubtless remain a key issue for ongoing debate. The book is indeed, as the author posits, 'a live political docu-

ment' and a 'call to action' for those who share a commitment to the resolution of colonialism's legacies across Australia. ■

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Plein air

Susan Wyndham

WOMERAH LANE:
LIVES AND LANDSCAPES
by Tom Carment

Giramondo

\$39.95 pb, 261 pp, 9781925818215

Tom Carment the artist, writer, and man makes a perfectly integrated whole. Carment is a compact, casually neat figure who looks through round-lensed glasses and has a calm stillness even when he's on the move, as he often is. His art and writing are also on a small scale, intimately observant, informal, and warmly appealing. He has exhibited his paintings and drawings for more than four decades and has written for almost as long, occasionally for publication and often in private. As he said at his book launch, he used to pour most of his thoughts into letters, including one he found recently that ran to thirty-eight pages.

Womerah Lane gathers more than forty 'essays, non-fiction stories and vignettes' written over three decades. As a collection, they create a loose memoir of Carment's life, but chronology is less important than themes of place, history, community, relationships, memory, and art itself. The unhurried pace invites readers to dip in rather than hurry through.

Carment gives a modest summary of the subjects covered: 'swimming, drawing, Albert Namatjira, art supplies, friends who've died, long journeys, the Easter Show, the Opera House, rabbit-rearing, sheep-rearing, hitchhiking, water-divining, long-distance cycling, building construction, and even ... my love of telegraph poles, typewriters and eggs.'

Carment has lived in Sydney for

most of his life; Womerah Lane is his family's long-time address in inner-urban Darlinghurst. His opening essay describes without judgement the goings-on in the lane, from drug deals and prostitution to children in paddle pools. Carment observes his neighbours with clear-eyed affection. There's the retired head of the Seamen's Union whose portrait he painted four times; a man who played Barbra Streisand records loudly every day and shouted at Carment's daughter, the only time the mild-mannered artist shouted back; a homeless man who slept under houses and promptly slipped a two-dollar coin under the gate to repay Carment's loan.

Throughout the book, Carment's gentle stories are yeasted with odd details and well-timed humour. The funniest recurring motif, though perhaps not for Carment at the time, is the trouble his unthreatening presence attracts. As a plein-air painter, he works on location and quickly, but not quickly enough to escape attention. People think he's suicidal, selling drugs, or writing parking tickets; police question him; strangers chat and ask for money; a cow nudges him with its wet nose; a dog lifts its leg on his back. He's always polite but sometimes shaken.

Almost every story, no matter the ostensible topic, is about Carment's artistic life. Alongside the words run finely reproduced works of art he created in that place: impressionistic oils, luminous watercolours, sketchy pencil and charcoal drawings capturing both snapshot moments and movement in their shimmering lines.

From his city base, he travels the Australian continent from Queensland to Western Australia to visit friends, seek adventure, and find new locations. There are family camping holidays to the beach, working visits to country

properties, cycling trips, hitchhiking, and solitary walks in the bush, always with his portable studio of paints, panels, and folding stool. Carment is a curious reporter, recording dates and arcane facts, enhanced by the artist's dash. He remembers the brand and variety of a cat food can stuck on a lizard's head, sees sleeping passengers on a train as 'plaster casts of Pompeii victims', and notes that Grafton Anglican Cathedral is built with half a million pink sandstock bricks. The long chapter on Cooktown is a profound nugget of Australian history.

Perhaps the greatest distinction between his visual and written records is that the painted scenes are empty of people, or at most show a few vaguely outlined figures, while the stories are alive with colourful characters and conversations. On his travels, he meets truck drivers, farmers, and waitresses; he's at home with old-timers, though his antenna twitches at the ingrained prejudices he sometimes encounters.

Carment's wide network includes artists such as Brett and Wendy Whiteley, and writers David Malouf, Robert Gray, and Gillian Mears, whose unpredictable life he recalls through their letters. His fine account of helping to dismantle the studio of photographer Olive Cotton is quoted at length in Helen Ennis's new biography (reviewed on page 23). This story, like most, ends delicately: 'The next day, Olive gave me a print of a gum tree against the sky. The signature is unsteady and there are white hairs on the darks, but I like it for that.'

Accidents, illness, and deaths accumulate. The tone becomes gradually elegiac as he writes about late friends and his father, a survivor of Changi, Sandakan, and Kuching, who sat for his son four times, occasions Carment remembers as some of their most meaningful and relaxed together. His word portraits are created with the same steady gaze as the painted ones, which have often been hung in the Archibald Prize.

There is fascinating expertise in Carment's chapters, specifically on his methods, materials, and influences from Caspar David Friedrich to Edward Hopper and Albert Namatjira. He came to still-life painting late, at the age of

sixty, inspired by the red onions in a Velázquez painting. Even then his partner, Jan, suggested that he should wait until he was too decrepit to leave the house.

In his sixties, Tom Carment remains ageless and energetic, exhibiting regularly, his style little changed but always

fresh. This beautifully written, illustrated, and produced book enlarges our vision of Australia through the highlights of a distinctive and inspiring career. ■

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Flannery's bedrock

Libby Robin

LIFE: SELECTED WRITINGS

by Tim Flannery

Text Publishing

\$39.99 hb, 512 pp, 9781922268297

One of the pleasures of reviewing a book is reading it slowly, paying attention to the rhythms and its author's intentions, impulses, and indulgences. Reading is always a conversation between writer and reader. A major collection like *Life: Selected writings* takes this experience to a new level. This is not just a conversation between a writer now and a reader now, but a writer then, his choices now, the sum of those choices as arrayed in a substantial blue volume, and the reader with a 'long now' to luxuriate in the exchange.

This is a wonderful summer book: it can be tasted in short, self-contained moments or read as a large, luminous whole exposing the historical concerns of a polymath over nearly thirty years. More than a memoir, it captures snapshots of the intellectual musings of a feisty, funny writer – sometimes angry, sometimes lost in wonder. Almost like a diary, the essays have a subtext revealing what else is happening in Flannery's life and times: 'Ground Zero', for example, an essay that describes the geological and biological genesis of North America sixty-five million years ago, carries the date 2001.

Flannery speaks of exploring and growing up in museums. He describes himself as an explorer, and he writes traveller's tales that wilfully cross times and places, unpacking ideas. He reads

– and introduces – explorers' diaries. Deeper in time are the imaginative travels of his palaeontological fieldwork. His youthful wildness was tamed through the calming mentorship of the Museum of Victoria's vertebrate palaeontologist Tom Rich. Visits to hallowed halls of bones have shaped many of Flannery's big ideas. He reverently describes his visit to the Humboldt Museum, the 'finest natural history exhibition on Earth' (in the 1930s at least). But the date of his visit, 11 November 1989, is also significant. The articulated dinosaur specimens of the 'glorious colonial age' of German East Africa are shadowed as fireworks blaze above the falling Berlin Wall outside. The extraordinary museum and its place in world history become the backdrop as another story unfolds. It is now 2019, and we are adventuring in eastern Indonesia, exploring evolutionary cul-de-sacs, and their near-extinct fauna, guided by knowledgeable locals. Alfred Russel Wallace formulated his theory of evolution by natural selection in the Spice Islands, a tiny volcanic archipelago straddling the equator. We end this essay scuttling outside in haste, chased by the hounds of the East German museum. Flannery takes both physical and intellectual risks in his explorations. It is the interweaving of these that makes the essays so vivid.

Adventurous, curious, and intriguing, these fifty essays work together to explore the macro and micro of life through biological, evolutionary, geological, and cosmological time frames, sometimes all at once. The bedrock of Flannery's oeuvre is history – environmental, natural, human. His big continental natural histories, three of them, have structured his thinking over three decades. *The Future Eaters* (Australasia, 1994), *The Eternal Frontier* (North