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CULTURE BOOKS SPECTRUM

Autumns of change: seven Australian writers reflect

By [Liam Pieper](#), Nicole Alexander, Ellena Savage, Mirandi Riwoe, Tom Carment, Vanessa McCausland and Laura Jean McKay

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Liam Pieper

A few years ago I moved to Sydney, a place I don't really fit into, as I can afford neither cocaine nor real-estate speculation - both vital in a city comprised equally of grinding status anxiety and the most beautiful beaches imaginable.

I knew I was not making the most of the ocean - but then again, I couldn't swim. Never did learn. But as my 30s slouched by, in a fit of optimism, I decided to better myself and signed up for formative weekly humiliation at a suburban swimming school under the supervision of a nice teenager called Craig.



Swimmers at Mahon Pool in Maroubra on a warm autumn morning. JANIE BARRETT

Most people who take swimming classes are children, it turns out, and no amount of therapy will make you examine your choices quite as intensely as sharing an

instructor with an asthmatic eight-year old in prescription goggles. How to explain to the suspicious-looking parents who glare at me, as I mooch poolside with speedos and kickboard, that I am being very brave?

One good thing about the abject loneliness of Sydney: I'm unlikely to run into anyone I know at the pool. Nobody need ever know about this unless I were to, say, write about it for a newspaper.

Craig looks as uncomfortable as me, but shows the basics of floating, kicking, wagging one's arms in the water, and turning the head to the side to breathe. He sets a goal for me, a marker about 20 metres down the pool, and asks me to swim towards it, then moments later, fishes my waterlogged cadaver out of the lane.

"Hmmm," he says. "Right. You're turning a very strange colour out there. Sort of grey. I think the problem is you're inhaling water instead of air. If you can fix your breathing, theoretically you can swim forever."

I'm a freelance writer, so the sensation of floundering while a peripheral authority figure yells instruction is not novel to me, and I grow determined to impress Craig.

I start going to a separate pool, where Craig won't find me, to practise. It's an indoor family pool in the suburbs. The only other patrons are fellow indolents – hippies and a water-aerobics class for retirees.

"Who's had a hip replacement in the last three months?" the water-aerobics instructor bellows cheerfully and half the crowd slowly waves a hand above their heads.

I put my goggles on and practise my breathing. A solitary detached dreadlock floats by me underwater.

If you can fix your breathing, theoretically you can swim forever.

Liam Pieper

I train all through winter and by late spring I feel ready to carpe diem, right around the time the world starts to end. Summer arrives, and the ancient forests that ring Sydney burn, and, above the steady rain of falling cinders, the sun is hidden behind clouds the same angry grey I turn while swimming. Weeks pass and summer sinks towards a weird nuclear autumn. The trees begin to drop their leaves, and the harbour disappears into the smoke, but determined, I go to the ocean, and paddle out. And I can swim! I can breathe in the water!

Another moment of reflection - as I pass the breakers and lose sight of the shore through the thick coils of smoke that roil across the black water – this was a bad idea. I cannot breathe the water; I cannot breathe the air. I have left it 'til too little remains of the day to seize it, too late for my body, for this earth. And, so wheezing, I turn back, swim until I reach the shore and the end of that weird,

weird, season, when I learnt that all the optimism in the world can't keep you breathing forever.

Liam Pieper is a journalist and author of the memoir *The Feel-Good Hit of the Year* and the novel *The Toymaker*. His new novel is *Sweetness and Light* (Penguin).

Nicole Alexander

In the late 1990s, my savvy decision following several years working in the corporate world and living in Singapore, was to head back to the family home. The bush to be exact. A property located north-west of Moree in NSW. Ah the memories. Those rich black soil plains. A childhood playground only limited by the horizon. School lessons taught by Mum in the homestead. How difficult a transition could it be? After all, this was to be a sabbatical of sorts. Twelve months at home in the Australian bush. Space. Lots of space. No deadlines. No traffic. Only the sound of the wind through the trees, the call of livestock and the scuttling of bush creatures in the deep quiet of night. Balmy, soothing, meditative.



Nicole Alexander on her property north-west of Moree in NSW.

But home was also a business. A working station where my father was the boss. The men who formed part of the team were quick to pigeonhole me as a "city slicker", someone who would eventually head back to the big smoke and the latte set. This was reinforced when I overheard a comment made by our head stockman to my father, "Boss, once you send a kid away to be edumacated they're bugged for bush life." My father, in not replying, gave his tacit agreement. In my defence it was my first time trying to reverse a tractor with 40 feet of sowing rig attached.

But here's the thing. The longer I stayed on our property the more I wanted to be a part of the family business and I didn't miss the corporate world. It was autumn. The blue haze of the scrub was peppered with a myriad greens and browns that drew me with its tangy scent. I saw things. Felt things. The rough nests of emus

filled with glossy emerald eggs. Snakes lulled to complacency by the cooler weather. The rapid, whirring flight of quails. The sting of an early frost on my ears and nose. And that sky. Glittering. Infinite. Welcoming. Suddenly, it wasn't enough to be a bystander watching others work the land my great-grandfather had selected.

The men who formed part of the team were quick to pigeon-hole me as a "city slicker".

Nicole Alexander

I took a leap of faith and offered my services. First in the station office, and then out in the paddock. Mustering. Branding. Dipping. Riding. Driving. Fencing. "I'm only going to show you this once," the stockman advised with the attitude of someone who truly doubted my ability. I listened. I learnt. All the time being treated respectfully, but not seriously. This was the '90s. The benefit of a female who could assist in making decisions both in and beyond the office was going to take time to be appreciated.

I persevered. Out mustering cattle one day. A chopper overhead. My bike weaving through timber. I accelerated, quickly gaining on the trotting cows. With visions of Clancy in my head I wheeled the mob to the right. A grin spread across my face. I could do this. Then, through the scrub a cow appeared. Head down, she snorted and charged. I revved the bike speeding through spindly belah trees. Dew-wet spider webs wrapped about my face as I frantically brushed away the scuttling inhabitants. I ducked and aimed for a gap between two saplings. Misjudging the space, the bike came to a jolting stop and I was flung over the handlebars. The mad cow had disappeared, and I was on my back staring at a patch of blue sky through the branches overhead. I took a deep breath and laughed as a leaf fluttered down to land on my face. Finally, after many years, I could breathe again.

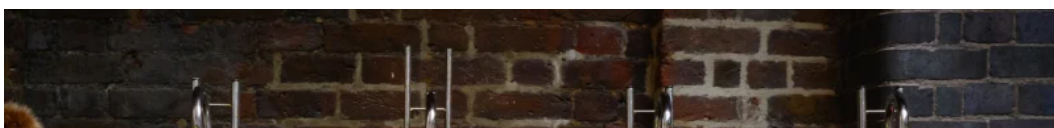
Nicole Alexander is a fourth-generation grazier and the author of nine novels. Her latest novel *The Cedar Tree* (Bantam) is published on March 3.

Ellena Savage

Every autumn, as if by clockwork, I am struck by a sense of disintegration. Who I am supposed to be? Or rather, how am I to communicate who I am - or should be - via the medium of dress?

Am I a high-powered young professional? An ageing environmentalist? A former club darling who will not betray her origins? A witch?

When I was young, these autumns of disintegration struck frequently, and sent me trawling op shops.





"I will return again to the op shop, to decide who I might become." ISTOCK

The ensembles I scoured for then required chance, genius and labour. They had to cost \$5, no more, and look chic. They had to obscure the parts of my body I hated. And they had to articulate my atemporal social aspirations, which were that I was in some way connected to the New York downtown scene of decades earlier, or post-Reign-of-Terror Paris, which, in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in 2003, I was not.

I did large men's silk shirts staged as dresses with platform heels, I did pencil skirts with 1970s tennis shirts tucked in. I did Victorian night gowns with military boots, I did track-pants with heels and leather jackets. At 14, I gave myself a pixie cut in the bathroom. At 20, I shaved my bob off and wore a little silk neck tie everywhere I went.

I used clothes to distract from my brokenness, I used clothes to distract from the shape of my body. I used clothes to attract a certain kind of person into my life - a person who was attracted to a boyish girl dressed up like a distressed aristocrat with red lips and broken shoes that cost a dollar and an old woman's - who is probably dead - polyester shirt. A person who, like me, would happily spend the last of their money on second-hand clothes they might never wear, might return directly to the place of purchase, in an old plastic bag, in 12 months' time. A person who was probably wearing a dead man's outfit, too.

I used clothes to distract from my brokenness, I used clothes to distract from the shape of my body.

Ellena Savage

Had I been young at a different time, after op shops became priced for working professionals, I might have dressed in cheap chain-store clothing instead. I might have become a different person entirely. The outfits I wore became me; I became the outfits I wore.

Then, about 2007, young women with artistic aspirations received the gift of vintage dresses. This trend was in some ways democratic. You could still very easily find old dresses at op shops for a few dollars and take them in, or out, at the waist. They came in as many sizes and styles as there are historical women, which is many.

Partly, this trend was inspired by the stylish oppression of *Mad Men* costumes. Partly this trend was a way of countering the unflattering bubble skirts and too-low-waisted jeans and the general oversaturation of denim playing out in the fast-fashion market.

Partly, the period I am talking about, which was not so long ago, was not a great time to be a young woman. The dresses, the lipstick, the bangs and braids, made young women's disappointment at the hands of galling young men seem both tragic and ironic; in any case, deliberate. In any case, stylish.

Chance, genius, labour.

Things keep changing. Faster than I would like. My body. My means. Marital, migration, education status. All without psychic integrity ever being achieved! I no longer have the circumstances to justify dressing like an exuberant child, yet I am not able to dress in fine garments tailored to the particularities of my body. So, I will return again to the op shop, to decide who I might become.

Ellena Savage is an author and academic who lives in Athens, Greece. *Blueberries* (Text) is her first collection.

Mirandi Riwoe

It was a balmy autumn when I travelled to North Queensland with my husband to carry out some research for my upcoming novel set in the gold rush era. We started in Cooktown, which is the port at which many Chinese diggers landed in the 1870s.



"As we set up camp on the sandy banks of the Palmer River towards dusk, late autumn finally peeped through and it became chilly enough to slip on a sweater." MIRANDI RIWOE

Cooktown is a pretty place, much smaller now than in its heyday. The esplanade overlooks aquamarine water and, standing at the shoreline, I imagined that it might have been here that countless Chinese men first set foot onto Australian land. Perhaps they clasped the brambly mangroves to steady themselves. They probably found shelter under the umbrella trees, and took in how the rays of sunlight yellowed the wide leaves of the Leichhardts.

My husband pointed out a tree covered in edible nuts, what he called "beach almonds" (*Terminalia catappa*). I wondered if any of the men cracked them open to eat, or slipped them into their pockets for later. Or was the tree stripped naked by those who had already passed through? For, during this period, it is reported that as many as 1900 Chinese people arrived to dig for gold along the Palmer River, a much larger number than the white settlers in the area. How different Queensland, or even Australia, might look today had the White Australia policy not been introduced.

We hired a four-wheel-drive to explore the goldfields, choosing to not walk the 100 miles over a gruelling three-month period just as many Chinese gold-diggers did at the time. I hoped not too many of them travelled during the wet season, sticking to the bright warmth of autumn like we did. Driving for an hour or so, we left the bitumen road and phone coverage behind us and bumped across the rugged terrain for another two hours. We gazed at distant mountain ranges, verdant layers of differing shades. Three black cockatoos communed in the high branches of a bloodwood. The grass was straw dry or tipped in flame orange, and swayed knee high. We passed ironwood trees, with their blackened trunks the texture of crocodile hide. Huge red gums. Tea trees.

Finally, we came to Maytown, traditional land of the Western Yalanji people. In the 1870s, Maytown hosted many hotels, stores and butcher shops. There was even a lemonade factory. The dirt road must have billowed with blinding, thick dust when town was full, brimming with horses, tents, Chinese men, Europeans, bullock drays, dogs, chickens. Now, the only traces left of this township are the cobblestone edging along the main street, the ruins of the baker's oven and the stumps of the post office. Along each side of Leslie Street are plaques, commemorating the businesses that used to be housed there. Five premises in a row belonged to James Ah Fun, Chew Lee, King Yeeh and Chin Poo. Several kilometres away is the Chinese cemetery, a fenced-off area that overlooks a stunning, craggy gorge. Deceased Chinese sojourners, who were not returned to China in special urns, now rest under neatly stacked rocks.

Now, the only traces are the cobblestone edging along the main street, the ruins of the baker's oven, and the stumps of the post office.

Mirandi Riwoe

As we set up camp on the sandy banks of the Palmer River towards dusk, late autumn finally peeped through and it became chilly enough to slip on a sweater. I took in the ochre sunset and wondered if once, about 145 years ago, this peaceful riverbed was crowded with hundreds of Chinese men, industriously panning for gold, growing vegetables, carting goods, administering medicine, providing meals. Now, our only company were the birds- the twit-twit of the emerald-breasted parrots, and the two ghostly boobook owls that swooped for insects by the light of our lamps

Mirandi Riwoe is the author of *The Fish Girl* and *Stone Sky Gold Mountain* (UQP) published in April.

Tom Carment

According to the Nyoongar calendar, the third season of six, in April, is called Djeran, the "season of adulthood", when the weather gets cooler.

I was helping clear out my partner Jan's parents' house in Marmion, a northern suburb of Perth. The asbestos shed near the back fence was full of tools and machinery that hadn't been used for about 15 years, since before her father Don's death eight years ago. Someone was coming around at 10 o'clock to inspect the woodworking gear, to see if anything could be useful at the local men's shed. I thought I'd better test things out and see if they still worked all right.

The bandsaw was a solid 1940s model, made in England. I turned it on and the thin blade whirled around steadily. Next, I flicked the switch on the bench grinder. Its twin wheels turned just halfway, then stopped, the motor humming. The head of a silvery lizard and just one half of its body popped out from under the wheel and hung down, attached by a sticky tendril of blood, then it plopped, still twitching, onto the bench.

The autumn of 2019 was a poignant one - the family home had been sold and needed to be decommissioned quickly. We flew to Perth and had just seven days to finish clearing the place out, down to zero, before the real estate agent and the new owners came around to inspect it and take the keys.

As a young family we'd spent many summers in this 1970s brown-brick house, with its modest bedrooms, sunken lounge room and immaculate square of irrigated back lawn. Time seemed to slow down when we stayed there, and it was just 10 minutes' walk from the Indian Ocean. I'd repaired the furniture and sanded and painted all of its gutters and eaves. A picture I'd painted, of an autumn tree in Rushcutters Bay Park, hung on the kitchen wall.





Singer typewriter in Don's shed, Perth. TOM CARMENT

After Don stopped using the backyard workshop in about 2004, I incrementally took it over, turning it into my Perth studio. When it got too windy to work outside, I painted still lifes, of old typewriters, inside the shed's front door. I sat them on a blue-green travelling chest and propped my palette on a wheelbarrow. I rested wet oil paintings on the shed's horizontal joists, and primed wood panels on the workbench. Don's tool collection remained in situ, on pegboards around three walls, slowly getting rusty in the sea air. I liked being out there.

By the time Jan and I arrived at Marmion, in April 2019, the other members of the family had removed all the beds, the kitchen table, the grandfather clock and the piano. Our job was to sort out what remained – the dregs you might say. We slept on a camping mat in the lounge room amid boxes. A big metal skip was delivered to the verge on the east side of the house.

My primary task was to clear the crammed shed in the backyard, while Jan started on the kitchen and study. I began with the cupboards, packed tight with jam jars and small boxes filled with screws, nails, antique spark plugs and orphaned bits of metal and plastic. Each labelled drawer was a honeycomb of thrift and self-reliance. Loose cladding banged in the breeze and birds' claws scrabbled on the roof above my head as I figured out what to throw out, keep or salvage. Lastly, I took down the chisels and saws from their Texta-ed silhouettes on the pegboards. I loaded up the family's Ford sedan, and made numerous trips to the Balcatta Recycling Depot, trying not to waste anything. When the shed was empty I swept 45 years of sawdust and sand from its far corners and shut the door.

Each labelled drawer was a honeycomb of thrift and self-reliance.

Tom Carment

Jan gave me 11 boxes of books to deliver to the WA Historical Society in Nedlands. I stubbed my toe painfully on their doorstep as I lugged them in. I inquired as to whether they'd also want our 24 volume *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a 1969 edition, whose reportage of history fell just short of Man on the Moon, and the coup in Chile.

"Sadly, no one wants encyclopaedias these days," the lady there told me, smiling, with her head on one side.

On the last afternoon, before the final inspection, I took a new Stanley knife blade, laid all the *Britannicas* on a bench and sliced out the sections on Japan, Chile, costume design, embroidery, tapestry, birds, spiders, butterflies and portrait painting. I put these sheets in a folder. Then I threw what remained into the skip. It felt like sacrilege.

That night, the day before the inspection, we bought drinks and snacks, and turned on the multi-coloured globes that hung over the patio, outside the clean and empty rooms. Neighbours came over and we toasted the house, the memories and friendships it contained, tapping our glasses in the autumn evening.

Tom Carment is one of Australia's most accomplished plein air artists and the author of *Womerah Lane: Lives and Landscapes* (Giramondo).

Vanessa McCausland

During the summer I was in hibernation, my belly swollen as a plum. I wore long dresses and mooched around wondering what colour your eyes might be. You were born on the cusp of the season. As autumn cooled and crisped the air, my world was a tree shifting from green to burnt orange.

The day you arrived was bright and hot, like the shock of your entry into the world. That first night, as you slept beside me, your tiny face still knotted from your journey through my body, I knew nothing would ever be the same again.

I had left behind innocence; summer-like, easy, of being alone in the world. I felt with every molecule in my body that you were bound to me. A sapling curling up a tree. The newness of you was heady. The smell of your sweet scalp made my breasts leak and tears of gratitude squeeze from my eyes. I watched the liquidambar turn yellow and then red from our apartment window, dazed from sleepless nights but warm in our cocoon. The sunshine felt comforting now instead of something to hide from and the apples were crisp and sweet. I ate them while we walked through dew-wet suburban streets.

But on days neither of us had slept and nothing would lull you, the scarcity of the earth surrendering its green leaked into me. I had given you everything and I was dried up and low as the midday sky. On those hard, windswept days, my mother's moussaka in our freezer was the only comfort.



Vanessa McCausland with Sophie: "That first night, as you slept beside me, your tiny face still knotted from your journey through my body, I knew nothing would ever be the same again."

At times the tightness of your new tendrils suffocated me and I thought I might die. Love and fear are the conjoined twins of parenthood. As the air grew frigid I brought out all the knitted blankets we'd been gifted.

I tucked you under pale lemon wool and watched your translucent lids twitch and worry. The milky dreams of babies. I awoke with the dawn. I worried whether you were warm enough. Dawn is the coldest time. And summer was gone. The days were shortening, our evening walks contracting with the crunch of leaves and the dark air that nipped my bare ankles.

But in that milky morning light of your room, my heart stilled. The pale lemon blanket covered your face, as though you were not there at all. As though you had never been. The world became strange. Those four steps to cross the room to you were the longest of my life.

As I peeled back the blanket, I remembered how I had expected your hair to be pale, like mine. I remembered how I expected you to nap, lulling you in the pram under rain-sodden skies. I remembered all the ways I expected you to be. To look, to feed, to grow, to learn.

At times the tightness of your new tendrils suffocated me and I thought I might die.

Vanessa McCausland

I found the soft curve of your cheek, warm. I pressed your sleepy body to mine and I shed it all. That summer innocence, the dewy green leaves of expectation I'd held to so tightly. They fell to the ground. I let go of everything except you. I was raw. Stripped but strong, as the bare autumn trees outside your window.

Vanessa McCausland is the author of the novel *The Lost Summers of Driftwood* (HarperCollins).

Laura Jean McKay

It was cold, that autumn. I felt it when I returned from Indonesia with a fever, an angry rash and the feeling that my bones would snap every time the temperature dropped. In the hospital in Melbourne they rushed me through and donned face masks. I had measles. I had an STI. I had dengue. Then, from the corner of the internet emerged a new word for what I had: chikungunya - a contorted person. I was contorted. Aid workers describe chikungunya as "dengue on crack". Friends, unable to wrap their tongues around Makonde language, called it "chicken dinner" or "chicken vagina". I thought of it as "the mozzie disease" and gave myself over.

The mosquito is the most dangerous animal in the world to a human (about 1 million of us die from mosquito-borne diseases each year). I'd like to say I looked that Asian tiger mosquito - the *Aedes albopictus* - right in the delicate beadwork of her eye. In reality, she bit me on the sly during an ill-fated dawn walk along a canal in Singaraja, northern Bali, and I had days of writers' events and sightseeing before I realised that my fleshy, mammalian body had been chosen by a tiny

stripy-legged beauty. I wasn't dying - chikungunya rarely kills - but I *was* taking on a distinctly different form.



Laura Jean McKay: When you're sick and you don't know it yet clap your wings!

In Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes up after "uneasy dreams" transformed into a monstrous insect. Back in Victoria, my dreams were filled with dusky wings, bent legs and whining and when I woke up that was my life. In this autumn of pain, I was fevered, bed-ridden, my skin was peeling off in sheets and I could barely pick up a pen. The only logical explanation was that I was turning insect. Too sick to move, I found myself staring out at the slow death of summer from the couch, desperately thirsty but knowing that if I got up, I would feel that my bones were breaking. I want to emphasise that this was very, very disturbing, but that I wasn't unhappy. There's a certain lovely inevitability in turning into a mosquito. Eventually, I reasoned, one of two things would happen: either someone would bring me a glass of water or I would grow wings and fly. I lay there on the couch cocooned in myself, waiting.

As the weather became stiller, I started moving again. I left skin behind when I crawled up the stairs. I vacuumed the house, then took to bed, crying with exhaustion. I ran for a train to get to the hospital and nearly passed out in the aisle. Medically inclined friends offered proper help but I couldn't type to reply. I was too tired to explain to people why I didn't show up or respond (and who wants an insect at a children's birthday party?) so I faded. It got colder. I didn't even think to organise a wheelchair. My partner pushed me through the streets of Melbourne on a bicycle, the chilly footpath clawing up my legs.

There's a certain lovely inevitability in turning into a mosquito.

Laura Jean McKay

The leaves turned and fell. I curled like a leaf – that Makonde contortion. I was stick-insect thin, by then, subsisting on the only thing a human-mosquito wants to eat: peanut butter toast. When I limped into uni one day in late autumn – an attempt to seem part of my PhD programme – an ex-student told me I looked "incredible". I took my wasted body home to look "incredible" in ripped pyjamas and arthritis cream and by autumn's end I was no longer myself. A truly weird creature, I slowly re-entered the world over the next year, changed, but learning little human ways again. Like taking one step forwards and two steps back. Like answering my phone: hello? Like getting my own damn glass of water and growing my own damn wings.

Laura Jean McKay is the author of the short story collection *Holiday in Cambodia*. Her debut novel is *The Animals in That Country* (Scribe).



Liam Pieper



Liam Pieper is a Melbourne-based author and journalist. His first book was a memoir, *The Feel-Good Hit of the Year*, and his first novel is *The Toymaker*.
