



# Writing on experience

## FICTION

**STREET TO STREET.** By Brian Castro, Sydney. Giramondo 2012, 160 pp, \$24

Reviewer: ALISON BROINOWSKI

It is their Catholic upbringing that seems to give some Australian male writers, at least, a lifelong fascination with double identities? Men encounter contesting selves and inhabit dual worlds in the novels of Christopher Koch, Gerald Murnane, and Brian Castro. Everywhere in their fiction are elect men who internalise personal battles like those between Jacob and the angel, or who believe they have within them both a child and a devil. These entities' experiences are as real to the authors as their own, so real that their lives may even continue after the authors who created them die. Readers can intuitively enter these inner worlds with the passcodes provided by the authors through hints, nudges, and knowing winks.

This had not occurred to me until I came across J.M. Coetzee, in a recent *New York Review of Books*, describing how Murnane lives an "image life" in the other world, to which readers "of the right kind" may be admitted, to rub shoulders with fictional beings. This invented world can as easily be in 1930s Hungary as in contemporary Victoria, Coetzee says, and Murnane scorns other Australian writers' preoccupation with Australian identity. So, obviously, does Koch: Jesuit-educated and fascinated with "doublemen", he has inhabited imaginary worlds since childhood, whether he transfers them to Indonesia, Vietnam, Ireland, Eastern Europe, or indeed Tasmania.

And so has Brian Castro, a Hong Kong-born Australian of Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, French and English descent, steeped in European culture and East Asian history, whose early experiences in Australia lead him to reject national and cultural labelling. His first novel, *Birds of Passage*, inhabits the dual worlds of a Chinese gold miner in Australia and an Australian-born Chinese in the 1980s, and his third is pointedly titled *Double-Wolf*. Readers not yet converted to Castro – and there is much more – should not be deterred by how post-modern all of this sounds. His wit can be as sly as his puns are awful, but those who keep up with him and have dictionaries in several languages handy

won't feel condescended to or outsmarted. Some pages clamour to be read aloud to whoever is nearby – the ones, for example, in his latest novella, *Street to Street*, on politically correct academic literati, who propose dropping Patrick White from the syllabus since all that's needed for non-sexy topics is Shakespeare. Or his account of how swiftly a Sunday morning tryst descends into a full-on lovers' battle.

In *Street to Street*, Castro again links past and present, and returns to the interwoven lives of two men several decades apart, the Irish-Australian poet-professor Christopher Brennan and his Irish-Chinese double-man, Brendan Costa. (This isn't the first time Brian Castro has had fun with the initials BC). Brennan is a "biggish fish in a tiny pond", trying to write his best poem that will be a gift no-one wants, while Costa works for years, like Dr Johnson's Boswell, to offer uninterested Australians his definitive critical appreciation of the professor. Both bear the scars and distinctions of Catholic education; both are loners and sentimental idealists, and utterly inept with women; both resort to alcohol in increasingly heroic quantities; and both come to premature and ignominious ends. If this sounds gloomy, it is, in the style of *On Our Selection*, Steele Rudd's novel of early Australia, in which squalor and disaster are so unremitting as to be comical. Brennan, in his malodorous overcoat, who thinks the intellect matters, has foul personal habits, and can't hold a steady job, comes to know "the masked balls of his purgatory". Costa, who has no chance of being larger than life, retires on minimal super and ends up opting to live in his imagination on the margins, dying in the Blue Mountains on the same day as Dante, his dog, enters Paradise.

Early in *Street to Street*, he sneaks a third person, un-introduced by name, a fellow student of Costa, who has known Brennan only as a building at Sydney University. He comments from time to time in the narrative, observing Costa in Amsterdam, reading between the lines of his letters, later going up to Blackheath to visit him, and noting that Costa has to re-enact Brennan if the poetry is to come alive for him. Hint, nudge, wink: CB and BC, both "intending to pursue failure at any cost", are merging selves. So it is doomed to follow that when Costa hits upon a letter from Brennan to Mallarme, and discovers some unpublished poems of Brennan, their significance escapes him, and in the end his great work appears only in Dutch. The faceless third person remarks cynically that it is better to produce babies than books, since babies are always better received. He reveals that he has gone off with Costa's Dutch lover. But of the three, he is the last man standing, and he – Brian Castro perhaps? – inherits Boswell's burden.

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