

Tales from the land of Australian men

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THE KING OF PATAGONIA. Stories by Craig Cormick. Mockingbird (an imprint of Ginninderra Press). 104pp. \$15.

Reviewer: MARK TREDINNICK.

I READ the stories that make up Craig Cormick's new collection late into two weekend nights in a wooden cottage in the Blue Mountains, while my two children, sharing the house with me as they do every other week, slept without sound in other rooms. One lamp burned close by me, and the red digits of the clock radio made their sly progress towards morning. The night lay still. My two nights' reading composed the kind of landscape Cormick's prose explores — great silent reaches made of hard surfaces, filled with light or darkness, in which men, some of them lost, some of them searching, some going nowhere, most carrying wounds, make their way home.

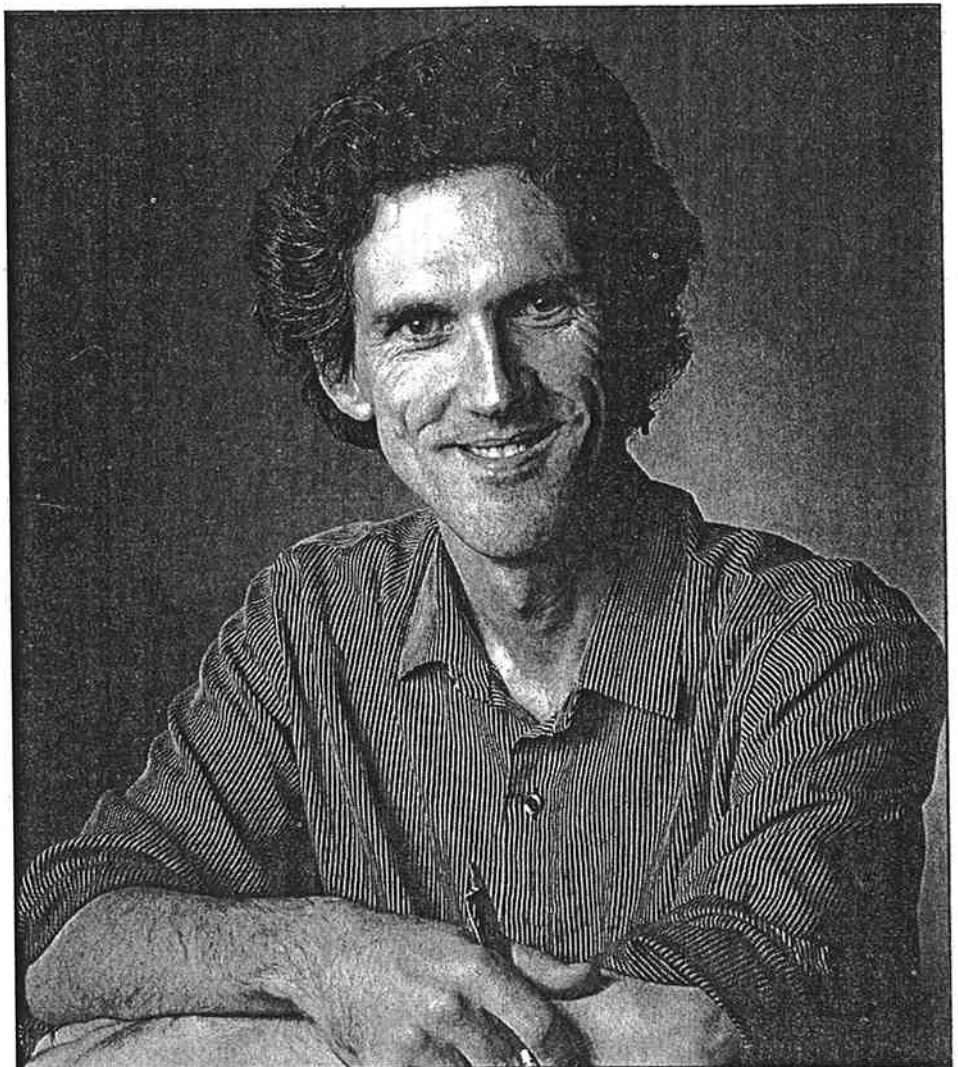
It happens that Cormick shaped these stories into a collection at the Varuna Writers' Centre near me here in Katoomba. Something of the air of this country has entered his stories. It is tough-minded country, indifferent and large: good land to learn love in. These mountains have an uncompromising edge against which Cormick has cut and finished these accomplished, compassionate stories; these valleys have a heavy silence and a surprising depth, which sounds in these stories too.

Cormick writes short sentences. Like this. On and on. Not shapely, and often incomplete, they are sorties with plain words into the unwelcoming terrain of masculine thought and feeling. Talking about complex things, travelling hard country, with ordinary words takes courage and deserves praise. But it is better to shape proper sentences more often than not — they make prose robust and reassure readers that you know what you're about. Often Cormick doesn't bother. You can tell he knows the old rules, but he would rather do it like this: "He has been trying to pray. But cannot... He goes to the door and looks out across the farm yard. Down the road. Towards the highway."

Or this: "He doesn't dare look up again until he hears the van start. Hears the heavy crunch of gears. Hears it moving slowly down the street."

Or again, this: "Then they're sitting together. At a table. Or at a camp fire."

This pattern, repeated in many of his paragraphs, becomes trying. Though it looks like rush and carelessness to me, I know it isn't. I suppose Cormick is trying to get at the uncertain, angular rhythm of male introspection. But it leaves his prose without much music. His words function. They serve. They do not sing. They stab at meanings and moments. His paragraphs,



Craig Cormick: Intelligence and integrity run through all his work.

nically conceived, are made of the fragments left from a brutal editing. They are pieced together from truncated sentences, and they suffer.

But let's talk no more of grammar and style. Cormick has won awards for his stories, and last year won the ACT Book of the Year Award for his *Unwritten Histories*. Intelligence and integrity run through all his work. And his sentences, in their fragments, help evoke stark emotional landscapes, made of broken promises, abandoned hopes, uncertain futures. Sometimes too, as in the lovely story "Post No Babies", which closes the book, they help him express the acts of love men are capable of performing, though rarely of articulating.

In the title story, Patrick waits without joy for his 33rd birthday and nurses his son back to life. "Heart Line" deftly joins

four stories: a father's broken marriage; his heart attack; the reconciliation of a father and a son; the wait for a distant nuclear test. "Footsteps" follows two boys lost in the desert. "Staring into Rock Pools", a masterful and touching piece set on some stormy coast, reflects with a young father on his lost marriage and the business of fathering his children. In "Lost in Space", a separated father sits out that ancient suburban vigil, waiting for his teenage daughter to come home, while Penny Robinson stumbles into danger on the television.

This collection is short, but it resonates long. Without literary posturing, it takes stories from close to home, stories particularly from the country of the Australian male — a land without much of a language in modern times — and writes them out, giving them depth, in lean and honest prose.

Images of the mother of humanity