

Tale of mockery and farce, but a sensitive mood prevails

FICTION

THE OLD COUNTRY. By Sam North. Simon & Schuster. 337pp. \$34.95.

Reviewer: **FRANK O'SHEA**

It is easy to poke fun at the English aristocracy. Their accent and demeanour, their haughty self-importance, set them up as easy targets for ridicule. What is not so common is mockery that is laced with affection, with respect for the person being mocked; even superannuated blimps, on their uppers and desperately holding on to the relics of past decency, deserve respect as human beings. Sam North succeeds in a book that at times threatens to descend into farce but is saved by its humanity and an underlying sadness.

As the story opens, Sir Michael Gough, Lord Woodford, is living in a draughty barn, courtesy of a kind lady for whom he is a totally ineffective caretaker. "Sometimes she approached him with a screwdriver or a hammer and nail and a tale of some broken fitting or other but they both ended up staring at the plug or the lamp or the broken door, and he wouldn't have a clue."

He has come to this situation courtesy of three failed marriages and crippling death duties that



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SHORT FICTION

A HISTORY OF THE BEANBAG: and other stories. By Susan Midalia. University of Western Australia Press. 176pp. \$24.95.

THE PRINCE OF FROGS. By Craig Cormick. Ginninderra Press. 122p. \$20.

Reviewer: **RACHEL CUNNEEN**

Many fiction writers claim that mastering short stories is more difficult than writing novels. At their best, short stories are luminous little universes, conveying complexity of plot, setting and character with a few select phrases. It's hard to surpass the pleasure of reading a well-crafted short story. In an instant, one can be transported to a different world, gaining startling insights in the blink of an eye. Small wonder then that many short story collections are published at the beginning of summer, designed to be savoured in brief snatches on bus trips, at beach houses, or in the guest room at Christmas.

Susan Midalia's *A History of the Beanbag* and Craig Cormick's *The Prince of Frogs* are both accomplished examples of the maturity of the short-story genre in Australia. In the recent past, this art form was too often earnestly realist or so wildly experimental that it left only fragmented impressions. These two writers have that enviable ability of making their writing look effortless – which usually means it has been painstakingly crafted. They create memorable characters in familiar landscapes, but are confident enough to venture into fantasy, or to soar occasionally into metaphysical territory.

Midalia's writing, in particular, is imbued with a strong sense of place. Most of her settings are recognisably suburban Perth, especially the leafy areas around the University of Western Australia, where this book was published. However, the narratives transcend the expected confines of "suburban literature", because their subject matter and perspective is varied and expansive. There are a few frustrated housewives and

inarticulate men, but Midalia's rich and intelligent prose means that they are never reduced to stereotypes. In "Meteor Man", for instance, Frank Marvell's ordinary life with his wife and two kids is suddenly, briefly, catapulted into another brilliant dimension. His experiences are solitary, which gives this story's conclusion a quietly haunting mood. Midalia is terrific at endings; her stories feel like the characters are left hovering on the edge of new and greater experiences.

The title, *A History of the Beanbag*, conveys the clever mix of the familiar, the plain daggie, and the intellectual in Midalia's writing. She references one of Helen Garner's best-known stories, "The Life of Art", and there are many similarities between her work and Garner's.



Midalia clearly delights in being a wordsmith: one story, "It's Only Words", is explicitly about "the business of language". Like Garner, she manages to be beautifully grammatical without ever being a show-off. Her style is unassuming, yet reveals a perspicacious intellect.

In *The Prince of Frogs*, Canberra author Cormick plays with an eclectic selection of current events and popular culture with the expertise of someone who has practised and perfected his craft. He has published more than 100 short stories and his last collection won the Steele Rudd Award in the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. Talent and experience have produced some gems here. His prose is fluent yet

Mature, confident storytelling

unadorned, with a relaxed idiom that is especially good when portraying young Australian men.

Cormick is also skilled at being political without ever straying into didacticism. One of my favourite pieces is "Not In My Lounge Room", about the difficulty of being a comfortable Westerner when unpleasant world events keep intruding into bland TV-land. A Sudanese child, "with an old man's face", comes out of the television set sometime on New Year's Eve and just won't go away again. Cormick is both deeply unsettling and very funny.

I like how many of Cormick's tales start flippantly, and seem to be about flippant people, and then drop several levels into disconcerting emotional honesty. "Sexpo", about a long-term couple trying to spice up their sex lives in one of those curiously Canberra "trade exhibitions", was wonderful in this way. "Waves", dealing with a man's emotions after his girlfriend's abortion, an under-examined subject in Australian fiction, is conveyed in an understated yet deeply moving manner.

Both Midalia and Cormick are unafraid of delving into the lives and perspectives of a variety of characters. We hear the voices of older, conservative women; young football players on a junket to Bali; a young man with intellectual disabilities; and a small German girl living in the West Australian wheatbelt. Cormick also experiments with voices from the past, portraying Ned Kelly, Caroline Chisholm and Henry Lawson sipping lattes desultorily in a 21st-century cafe. It's utterly enjoyable but it's also more than that: read together, these collections give a picture of an Australia that is peopled with refugees, Aborigines, white colonials and recent immigrants; the young and the old; the depressed and the exuberant; as well as a fair number of phantasms and ghosts.

In the weeks after our federal election, as ideas of Australia are reconfigured and reimagined, it's timely to immerse yourself in works of fiction such as these.

Rachel Cunneen is a Canberra writer, academic and researcher with a special interest in Australian literature.