



Magic in a past perspective

Unwritten Histories

Craig Cormick

THE BORROWERS
by Russell Wenholz

ONE OF the things I like about *Unwritten Histories*, which is one of my favourite, relatively recent history books, is that the author, Craig Cormick, is a local. I've seen him at local drama productions, Canberra airport and, last year, at a pedestrian-crossing on Ainslie Avenue. I said "G'day." He responded, but with that "Do I know you?" look on his face.

Cormick is a graduate of the old Canberra College of Advanced Education professional writing course. In my brief attendance at the college, I recall him as one of the more outgoing, live-wire students. As a student he served time as the person inside a decidedly frail-looking model of a Dalek that local business people employed to wander their malls in peak shopping hours, declaring, in a threatening voice, "Exterminate."

Unlike most graduates of professional writing courses, Cormick has become a published author. He has entered short-story competitions and won prizes. First prizes. Admittedly he has had to work at less creative jobs to earn a living as a radio journalist, speechwriter, teacher and marketing manager.

Judging from the bibliography of *Unwritten Histories*, he has done a prodigious amount of reading. Further, judging from the content of this book, he has given a great deal of thought to Australian history.

In *Unwritten Histories* (ACT Book of the Year 1999) Cormick takes events in Australian history and tells what *might* have happened. The stories lie somewhere between fact and fiction. He puts words into the mouths of such figures as Captain Cook, Joseph Banks, Charles Darwin, and Burke and Willis. Cormick's stories may not be "true" in the strict historical sense but they have a great feel for history. He is concerned with the interplay between Aborigines, white people and the Australian landscape. He indicates his purpose in writing *Unwritten Histories* in his selection of a quote to preface his stories: "If Australia is to be changed . . . then the kinds of stories we tell about Australia will have to change." (Stephen Muecke, *No Road*, 1997.)

In the story about explorer Edmund Kennedy of Cape York, titled, "Do You

Remember When You Heard Kennedy Had Been Killed?" fictional reporters are questioning Kennedy and his Aboriginal companion, Jackey/Jackey, about their expedition. In this piece, and others, Cormick is acceding effectively to a request Patrick White once made for Australians to "investigate the souls" of their explorers, rather than to "cast them in bronze".

Many less well-known events in Australian history are included in *Unwritten Histories*. Charles Darwin's visit to the Blue Mountains, after his visit to the Galapagos Islands, includes the retelling of the Aboriginal legend of the Three Sisters at Katoomba. A chapter on the Aboriginal cricket team that toured England in 1868 consists entirely of quotes from historians, journalists, an anthropologist and a spectator. There's simple poignancy in the story of the flight from Cape York cannibals of Mrs Watson, her child and her Chinese servant, in a large iron cooking pot in 1881.

Of course, Burke and Willis rate a chapter, "Dig: The forgotten history of Burke & Willis". Cormick later expanded this chapter and published it as a "booklet" in 2002. However, it was only 63 pages of well-spaced print — barely of novella length — not enough for me, as a reader, to "get into". Cormick has written more than 100 short stories. Several collections have been published, and, along with *Unwritten Histories*, are available in the ACT Library. I feel slightly guilty that I've read only one of these collections, *The King of Patagonia*. But these are all very thin publications of less than 100 pages. (I'm told this makes publishing sense, commercially.) The spines are so narrow that they would not be noticed on a bookshelf. Again, not enough for me to "get into". I'm waiting for the release of a larger volume. A "Complete Short Stories" or a "Best of" — a couple of hundred pages.

In the meantime I despair that *Unwritten Histories* is not better known. Certainly people I've recommended and lent it to have enjoyed it. But I suspect I would not know about it myself if Cormick were not a local writer — a writer I have a nodding acquaintance with.

Craig Cormick will be a guest at the Canberra Readers & Writers Festival and will adjudicate "The Great Debate: Can writing be taught?" at the National Library on August 27 at 1.45pm.



Unwritten Histories by Craig Cormick was ACT Book of the Year in 1999.

Bookshelf

Adam Phillips's top five reads

The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens
"Stevens is somebody who understands our need to make terrible things beautiful and also understands why this is something we must do and resist doing at the same time."
Jean-Paul Sartre's Baudelaire
"Sartre gives an account of the life that is based on the necessity of choices made with no risk rather than a biography of inevitability."
John Banville's The Sea
"It is the profoundest meditation that I've read

on the gratuitousness of memory."
Richard Rorty's Contingency, Irony and Solidarity
"It is the best contemporary account of a life based on pragmatic considerations rather than the necessity of knowing what one wants."
John Gray's Straw Dogs
"For Gray's historical sense that our best hope in political life is for an un-illusioned coexistence rather than a commitment to consensus."

Essayist and psychotherapist Adam Phillips is the author of *Winnicott*; *On Kissing*; *Tickling*; *and Being Bored*; *Monogamy*; *On Flirtation*; *Terror and Experts*; *Darwin's Worms*; *Promises*; *Promises*; and *Houdini's Box*. A fine prose stylist, he was formerly principal child psychotherapist at Charing Cross Hospital in London. His new book, *Side Effects*, will be published by Penguin in Australia in late August.

—Bern Naparstek



Author Adam Phillips