

The Getting of Wisdom (presented at Trentham, Words in Winter, 19 August 2018, by film critic and historian, Ina Bertrand)

I love stories – writing, reading and viewing them. Our culture (as with every other culture the world over) is full of stories – in many different media (newspapers, television and internet news, journal articles, short stories and novels, television and film...)

Stories are made up primarily of characters, events and locations, secondarily of emotions, attitudes and motivations... Out of all the elements potentially available for a story, a teller will make choices - selecting, organising, expressing. As a result, no two tellings of the same story will ever be identical. An example is the story of Ned Kelly and his gang. The first stories were those that circulated orally while the events were unfolding. That was followed by numerous tellings in newspapers and journals, continuing to the present day, and also novels and plays, films and television...

Today, we are looking at a story that has been told in at least five ways – in the autobiographical writing of Ethel Florence Lindsay Richardson (such as *Myself When Young*)ⁱ, in later biographies and commentaries about her, in the novel *The Getting of Wisdom* by Henry Handel Richardson (the alter ego of Ethel Florence)ⁱⁱ, in a written film-script by Eleanor Witcombeⁱⁱⁱ, and in a film directed by Bruce Beresford^{iv}. Using the terms as Seymour Chatman uses them^v, the story is common to all these discourses. Each discourse selects from, and organises, the potentially infinite story elements into a fixed discourse. From this perspective, there is no perfect antecedent against which any discourse can be judged – all discourses are equally valid, and should be judged within their own terms.

So you will not find me measuring the film against the book. I admire them both, as beautifully-realised narratives, using the strengths of their own medium to full advantage. This presentation is intended to introduce the film, so I will concentrate on that, but that does not exclude me from referring back to the script and the book and the events of a life, all of which share story elements with the film.

The Getting of Wisdom was a film that director Bruce Beresford had been planning for decades – he claims to have wanted to make a film of the book since he first read it at the age of twelve^{vi}. From the beginning of his film career he cherished this project. However, as he did not at first have a bankable reputation, he was advised to make a commercially successful film before applying for funding for anything as risky as *GoW*^{vii}. He made two Barry Mackenzie films (*The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie*, 1972, and *Barry Mackenzie Holds His Own*, 1974): both were popular and financially successful, but drew down the wrath of critics for their ocker subject-matter. *Don's Party* (1976) was both a commercial and critical success, before he felt confident of selling the *GOW* project.

Philip Adams had produced Beresford's earlier feature films and came on board enthusiastically. So did Director of Photography Don McAlpine. However, funding was still difficult to obtain, partly because bodies such as the Australian Film Commission believed only a woman could direct this film^{viii}. Beresford responded by employing Eleanor Witcombe as writer, not just because she was a woman but also because he admired her television adaptation of *Seven Little Australians* (1973). She went on to write *My Brilliant Career* (1979) and to become 'Australia's pre-eminent scriptwriter of adaptations.'^{ix} Beresford has often been critical of the wordiness of script-writers. He tells the story of cutting out all the words Eleanor Witcombe had written for the scene where Laura moves into Evelyn's room, considering that everything necessary could be said in a single glance passed between the girls.^x

Beresford auditioned thousands of girls for the lead role, and Susannah Fowle was selected, partly because she could play the piano (though the sound of another pianist was later dubbed), partly

because she fitted his ideas of how Laura should look, partly because she was capable of capturing both the vulnerability and the awkwardness of the character. Hilary Ryan, an American actress who had worked in Britain, plays Evelyn, the object of Laura's adoration. Among the smaller roles, you might recognise early performances by actors who went on to become stars of Australian film and television, including Kerry Armstrong (Kate), Sigrid Thornton (Maria) and Terence Donovan (Tom McNamara).

The adults were played by some of the best-known and most-respected actors of the Australian stage and screen: Julia Blake as Isabella Shepherd, Patricia Kennedy as Miss Chapman, John Waters as the misleadingly handsome clergyman, Maggie Kirkpatrick as Sarah, Monica Maughan as Miss Day, Candy Raymond as Miss Zielinski, Barry Humphries as the headmaster, Sheila Helpmann in her only film role as Mrs Gurley.

Brian McFarlane^{xi} makes a convincing interpretation of the novel as being not only a coming-of-age story, but fundamentally a story about narrative – about how narrative operates as well as about how Laura becomes a writer. The whole book is about telling stories – from the opening scene of Laura entertaining her siblings, through the Annie Johns and Chinky episodes, to Laura's desperate effort to entertain her peers with a romantic fiction about Mr Shepherd. The clearest enunciation of the problem of narrative is Laura's three attempts to impress the Literary Society: she fails with a florid, imagined romance, and with a tedious factual account of school life, but succeeds with a fiction based on her own experience.

The film shifts focus from Laura as a writer to Laura as a musician, and McFarlane sees this as a loss. His criticism is not that the film fails to be faithful to the novel, but rather that this shift removes the central theme of the novel without replacing it with something equally compelling. I do not agree.

There is a purely pragmatic reason for this exchange of story element/s: it is easier to represent musical performance in a visual medium than it is to represent the art of writing.

But the main reason I do not feel this change of story elements as a failure of focus is that I consider McFarlane has not taken sufficient account of the time differential between the novel (written in the first decade of the new century about events in the 1880s) and the film (written and produced in the 1970s). The 1970s is a period when the Australian film industry was battling to resurrect itself. One thread of this revival was the ocker films (including those that Beresford made). But another important thread was film nostalgia (*Seven Little Australians*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) – beautiful recreations of Australia's past. Though some critics denigrated this romantic view of Australia^{xii}, audiences loved it, and the industry became very good at realising it in décor and costume and atmosphere.

At the same time, the seventies saw the emergence of second-wave feminism, which was often combined with nostalgia in a rewriting of history to recognise the achievements of real women such as HHR or Ethel Turner or Miles Franklin, and to celebrate the feisty female characters they had produced – Sibylla, or Judy or (in our case) Laura Tweedle Rambotham^{xiii}.

From this perspective, Laura's main narrative function in the film is to learn how to survive and make use of a system which is designed to inhibit and suppress female individuality. The film makes this point emphatically in three set pieces. In the expulsion scene, Laura witnesses what happens when a girl is defeated by the system: she learns from Annie Johns'/Chinky's experience, though she also feels guilty not only at having been part of the reason for it, but also at having been carried away by the drama of the situation. In the exposure of her fictions about Mr Shepherd, she learns the importance of controlling the narrative – not, this time, universal 'narrative', but rather the narrative

that women create to sustain their own individuality. In the final scene of the piano recital, she has enough confidence to take her own preferred path, in defiance of the school authorities, and in tribute to Evelyn, her older, wiser mentor among the girls. This relationship with Evelyn is constantly connected with Laura's music – each justifying the other as a central motif of the film. The relationship itself is presented sympathetically and sensitively. Yes, there are lesbian overtones, which would be typical of the 1970s, but the whole episode is present through a 1910s sensibility.

So I see the film as a beautiful representation of the story through the lenses of a burgeoning Australian film industry gaining confidence in telling Australian stories, and of a feminist movement finding new ways to encourage girls to grow into confident women. I invite you to look at the film to see if you agree with me...

Ina Bertrand

ⁱ Henry Handel Richardson, *Myself When Young*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1948.

ⁱⁱ Henry Handel Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom*, Heinemann, London, 1910.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eleanor Witcombe, *The Getting of Wisdom: Screenplay*, Heinemann Educational Australia, 1978.

^{iv} *The Getting of Wisdom*, Australia 1977, dir. Bruce Beresford.

^v Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, 1980.

^{vi} *Age*, 18 Aug.1979.

^{vii} Peter Coleman, *Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart*, Angus and Robertson, Melbourne, 1992, p.106.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.107.

^{ix} a role filled later by Laura Jones, according to Harry Kirchner (Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer and Ina Bertrand (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, OUP, 1999, p.542).

^x Coleman, *op.cit.*, p.108.

^{xi} Brian McFarlane, *Words and Images: Australian Novels into Films*, Heinemann Australia, 1983, ch.4.

^{xii} Sylvia Lawson, "Good taste at Hanging Rock: some notes on the death, rebirth and still-birth of Australian film-making", in John Tulloch (ed), *Conflict and Control in the Cinema: a Reader in Film and Society*, Macmillan Melbourne, 1977, pp.201-212.

^{xiii} Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians*, Ward, Lock and Bowden 1894; Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*, William Blackwood and Sons, 1901.