

**Launch Speech for Dorothy Johnston's novel, *Gerard Hardy's Misfortune***  
by Janey Runci, October 26, 2019 at Bay Room, Queenscliff Uniting Church

I have a little history with Dorothy Johnston, one that she is largely unaware of. Sometime in the years when I was bringing up my family in suburban Melbourne, teaching Literature to adults and trying to write when I could, I read Dorothy's short story, 'The Boatman of Lake Burley Griffin' and her novel, 'Ruth'. If I had to list a number of works that shaped my ideas about writing these two would be on it. There was a truth to them, something compelling. They opened up possibilities of what might be written about and how. I suggest you find a copy of 'The Boatman' and I can assure you that the famed Canberra lake will never look or feel the same again. You can also read more about Dorothy's ideas on Canberra in her essay from the Griffith Review, 'Disturbing Undertones'.

Sometime after that I heard about the Canberra Seven Writers Group, a group of seven women who met to critique and debate each other's work, of whom Dorothy was a founding member, and whose work has been hugely influential in the development of Australian fiction.

Over her writing life Dorothy has published nine novels and a collection of short stories and she has been twice short listed for Australia's most prestigious literary prize – the Miles Franklin.

What a wonderful surprise for me then years later to meet Dorothy in Queenscliff at an event for one of my favourite groups in the world, The Henry Handel Richardson Society, and then to find that her next book was to be about a Richardson academic who is murdered in Queenscliff, not that I want to encourage that to happen outside the pages of fiction! And what a pleasure it's been to hear little bits about the book as Dorothy worked on it for the last couple of years. Dorothy told me that in that time that she's having fun now after her more serious writing, but the more powerful qualities of that more serious writer of the past are evident in her current work.

And so to this book. Much of the action takes place in Queenscliff in the Royal Hotel. In the opening chapter the oddly-positioned body of the murdered academic, Gerard Hardy is found in the hotel basement, a sour smelling, damp and dark place that was once a morgue and doubled as a mental asylum, and it is clear that this is going to be a book about the subterranean layers of human behaviour and motivation, but it is also a book about the way we might climb up and out of that dark cellar, just as the detective Chris Blackie makes his way up to the tower of the hotel. I'll come back to that later, but suffice to say that

as with Lake Burley Griffin, as I drive into Queenscliff these days I am so much more aware of the Royal Hotel and of the events that have happened there, the stories that surround it, the complicated human lives that have peopled its rooms, and this brings me to a quote from the esteemed writer, David Malouf about a writer's use of setting in a novel, about **'how the elements of a place and our inner lives cross and illuminate one another'**.

### **A place and our inner lives.**

This phrase made me think a lot about the two writers we encounter today – Dorothy Johnston and Henry Handel Richardson, and how the elements of this **town**, and the **inner lives** of the characters they portray, cross and illuminate one another, and perhaps too the work of Richardson crosses and illuminates the story of Gerard Hardy. If you haven't read Richardson on Queenscliff I suggest you begin with her memoir, 'Myself When Young' recently re-published by Text Classics, and at least the third volume of 'The Fortunes of Richard Mahony' where Richardson explores her time in Queenscliff in fiction.

But back to the misfortune of Gerard Hardy. As I read on I was as eager as any mystery reader to work out who did it and why. I loved the references to Richardson, I loved the jokes. But it was another aspect that slowly gripped me and moved me. It struck me that this is a book about how we live with our dead. What I mean by this is how we adjust to/accommodate the loss of our connection with those who have been significant to us and have died. Richardson herself believed in Spiritualism as did her father and believed she had communication with her beloved husband after his death. Throughout 'Gerard Hardy's Misfortune' we see a range of ways in which the characters struggle to come to terms with the loss of loved ones, the loss of the possibility of communication as they had known it. I'm not going to give any spoilers, but I will say that the vision of this book is both compassionate and fearless, especially in its treatment of those who sniff out the weakness of others and capitalise on it.

And now I'd like to finish with a reading from the book, a little taster of what is in store for you. At this stage the body has been found and Chris is waiting on the steps of the Royal Hotel for the detectives to come from Geelong CIU. They've just phoned to say they've been held up.

*Unwilling to go on standing on the steps Chris climbed the spiral stairs into the hotel's tower, having first carefully stepped around ...about kindness*