

University of the Sunshine Coast

Gary Crew

Museum piece

Biographical note:

Dr Gary Crew is Associate Professor (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He is an established author of fiction for both youth and adult audiences. Crew's work is recognised internationally for his innovative interpretations of visual text. Crew has two new releases for 2012: the adult graphic novel *The Boy who Grew into a Tree* (Penguin), designed and illustrated by Ross Watkins, and his second adult novel, *The Architecture of Song* (Harper Collins), a narrative based on the miraculous qualities of poetry.

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When a thing is old, broken, and useless we throw it on the dust heap, but when it is sufficiently old, sufficiently broken, and sufficiently useless we give money for it, put it into a museum, and read papers over it which people come from long distances to hear. By-and-by, when the whirligig of time has brought on another revenge, the museum itself becomes a dust-heap, and remains so till after long ages it is rediscovered, and valued as belonging to a neo-rubbish age – containing, perhaps, traces of a still older paleo-rubbish civilisation. So when people are old, indigent, and in all respects incapable, we hold them to even greater contempt as their poverty and impotence increase, till they reach the pitch where they are actually at the point to die, whereon they become sublime.

Butler, Samuel 1970 [1908] *Essays on Life, Art and Science*, Port Washington, Kennikat Press: 45-6

1.

Returning

He opened the cab door and sat in the back. ‘Queensland Museum,’ he said. ‘Corner of Gregory Terrace and Bowen Bridge Road.’

The cab pulled away from the curb.

A glass screen separated passenger from driver. Tilting his head to avoid his own reflection (as one does when observing curiosities under glass), the passenger leaned forward. He noted the pits and craters of what he assumed had been an adolescent skin disorder on the back of the driver’s neck; scarring that had not faded with age.

‘I haven’t been to this place since I was a kid,’ the passenger said. ‘Must be fifty years ...’

The driver did not respond. Maybe he hadn’t heard; maybe it was the end of his shift; maybe he’d had a bad day.

‘I’m wondering if it’s as impressive as I remember: the architecture; the space; the exhibits ...’

The driver checked the meter. Maybe the instrument was faulty; maybe he’d changed zones from urban to metropolitan; maybe he sought a distraction.

‘I’m wondering why it still affects me,’ the passenger persisted. ‘Why I remember it so clearly.’

The driver made no comment.

The passenger sat back, gazing through the window to his left. Idle as he appeared (the driver took a glance in the rear vision mirror), he was, nonetheless, determined to articulate whatever was on his mind; to manage his errant thoughts. ‘Just the other day,’ he started in again, ‘I came across an article claiming you could psychoanalyse a building. The writer reckoned he wanted to put "architecture on the couch"¹; to interrogate a building like a shrink interrogates a patient – if you get my drift – to try to understand what made a particular building tick. And what made the people who

inhabited that building – or visited it – tick too. Anyway, peculiar as that might sound, I thought of this museum and how it's affected me. Always has, since I was a kid, so the idea that I could put both building and contents on the couch appealed to me. Along with myself, of course, seeing I remember it so well. The whole kit and caboodle. That's why I've come back. To try to work out why the place has gotten under my skin.'

Beyond the glass, the driver scratched the back of his neck.

2.

Gates

Stepping out of the cab, the passenger crossed the footpath to stand before the museum gates.

Pale skinned, bald and stocky, he might have been the man in Jeffrey Smart's painting *Cahill Expressway*, although he did not wear a suit. His trousers were cotton drill (stone coloured), his shirt blue chambray, his shoes tan leather brogues. His clothes labelled him a Queenslander, but the tan leather satchel slung over his shoulder suggested something else: he might be an artist, a musician, an author.

He might be me.

(He might prove to be you.)

The man slipped his hands into his trouser pockets and looked about. 'Zeke,' he announced, 'you're back.' Only then did he realise that the gates were shut.

He glanced at a sign to his left then checked his wristwatch (Heathrow – the Old Country – duty free): 8:55am.

Not long.

The gates were cast iron, painted Brunswick Green (over and over, so many coats, decade after decade, but the corrosive pocks lingered, suppurating, beneath); their elegant Victorian picket heads barbed lances. Also of cast iron – the same colour and design as the gates – the fence enclosing the museum grounds stretched left and right.

He grasped the central pickets with both hands and gave them a shake. 'Hey,' he shouted. 'It's Zeke. Come to claim my expectations,' and since books were his life, he stepped back, letting Dickens flood his brain:

Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Haversham's house, which was of old brick and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower ones rustily barred. So, we had to wait, after ringing the bell, until someone should come to open it. While we waited at the gate I peeped in ...²

That bit of the novel had annoyed Zeke since High School; surely the 'it' in 'until someone should come to open it' was referring to the bell, which was, after all, the nearest noun. So someone was coming to open the bell?

Editing – always editing – he picked at the paint.

The line should read, 'until someone should come to open the gate', and in frustration (at both the text and the lock out) he gave the bars a further shake.

As he did – with a buzz and a click – they swung inward of their own accord.

Technology, he thought, the place has changed.

Zeke headed for the entrance to the building itself. Splotches of wintery sun penetrated the tubular grey branches of a leafless frangipani dappling the red brick paving before him. Perhaps it was the queasy shifting of that lemony light – perhaps the sullen movement of those leaden boughs – that prompted a sudden giddiness. One of his turns, he knew – strange how they came on; always had, since childhood – and his satchel slipped from his shoulder as he staggered to grip the rear of a garden seat nearby.

The gate being open, the vision came, the voice.

'Dad?' Zeke answered. '*Dad ... ?*'

Raising his head, his palms to his temples, he whispered. 'I didn't expect you ... What is it? What brought you? Those gates? Ah ... You're letting me know, aren't you? You're giving me a nudge. You're reminding me. So it's not just here, not just this building – not just these gates – not exclusively. There's others, 'eh? Your power house. Us ...'

So he sat, mumbling, and so that other time returned; that other place – the dappled light allowing – as that memory, that voice, that vision of his father slipped through those towering gates.

As a boy, Ezekiel had visited his father at the municipal power house after school. He left early, while there was light. His father worked the night shift—6 pm to 6 am—shovelling coal into the boilers that lit the city.

(There were three boilers, surely, Zeke mused, giddy yet, though all three come back to him as one.)

'I could do with some company,' his father grunted, shovelling peas on a rare night home. So the dutiful mother cut sandwiches, made a thermos of black coffee and packed the leather satchel the boy slung over his shoulder. Daylight though it was, he checked the dynamo mounted on the front wheel of his push bike in case the dark fell fast (as it could, in winter) and he needed the flickering head lamp to guide him.

Cast iron gates barred the power house from the world (hobos, stickybeaks). These gates unnerved the boy. In the gathering dark their lance-like pickets loomed above

him, conjuring Cromwell's disinterred head stuck on a pike outside the Tower; an image he knew from his Arthur Mee's Pictorial Encyclopaedia. But night crept on and to reach his goal he must grip those bars and push. Puny as he was, he did just that.

The gates opened, groaning, and Ezekiel crept through, the sneaking darkness not altogether debarred since a little (a shade, a shadow) slipped through behind. Perhaps there was too much Hans Christian Andersen in him – through his mother, no doubt, since she was the bed time reader. The boy winced, recalling how Andersen's fictional shadow 'shrivelled up and became much smaller than it had been at home'³ as he prepared to face his father in the boiler room, seated on a wooden stool – he knew – hunched over a book (his Bible?) reading by the glare of the flames.

(How many boilers were there? Zeke wondered. Three, surely, yet he saw only one.)

His father was dark: his overalls, his boots, his stubbled cheeks, his hair and hands—his finger nails clogged with soot – but the whites of his eyes were wide, unblinking, as he lifted his head, eyeing the intruder.

'Aw!' Zeke moaned, rubbing his temples. 'This is too much. Too soon. Slower. Slower. I didn't love you. You hear me? I never loved you. I can own that now. I can own that ... So come in if you're coming, but slowly, and let's get this right.'

Appeased (or commanded?), the father came – slower – but as dark, as distant, the flames from the boiler raging, throwing shadows, dark as the man himself. Emboldened, the boy stepped forward, drawing strength from his shadow lengthening on the wall, 'so tall did it make itself', as Zeke recalled his childhood Andersen, 'the shadow stretched itself quite up the wall, farther even than the ceiling'⁴, and the boy grew stronger, seeing it, seeing himself grow, and when the shadow reached the ceiling it stretched across to peer down, powerful, over the father below.

'I am here,' the boy announced. 'I've brought sandwiches and coffee.'

The father stood. There was a moment of white teeth, purple lips. 'About time,' he said, taking the satchel. 'You having some?'

'Later,' Ezekiel answered, aware of the fire. 'Maybe ...' and pulling up a second stool, he sat.

So father and son faced each other.

Sometimes they sat at draughts. 'Checkers' the boy preferred to call them since that sounded manly. His father took the pieces from a wooden shelf, blew the coal dust off the cardboard box then, reaching for the folded board, opened it on an upturned kero tin placed between the stools where they sat to play.

Ezekiel did not enjoy this game. If he won he felt bad, if he lost he felt worse. When they were finished – whoever won or lost – he stood to fart or burp (an adolescent statement of which Zeke was ashamed) and more often than not he made a fuss of stretching as he secretly watched his shadow grow, empowering himself.

If his father went out to pee on the glistening mounds of coal in the yard he called over his shoulder, ‘Keep an eye on those pressure gauges. If the water falls below that mark’ – *What mark, where?* the boy wondered – ‘Yell!’

A gauge filled with water was mounted on the outer casing of each boiler (there was just one boiler, surely, Zeke mused. One gauge, one boiler). The gauge was a cylinder of transparent glass an inch in diameter and a foot long. The water level in the cylinder rose or fell according to the level of water in the boiler. If the water level visible through the glass was high, the water level in the boiler was too great, putting the entire system under threat; if the water level visible through the glass was low, the water level in the boiler was too low, also threatening the system. Only if the water level visible through the glass remained stable at a given mark – *What mark, where?* – could there be no doubt that the system was operating efficiently; no possibility – *None?* – that ‘The boiler might blow’.

Ever anxious, Ezekiel dared not say, ‘I don’t want to be here. I’m going home ...’ So he despised his father: the authority of him, the fear surrounding him, the darkness, the distance. No matter how close, he was never near.

And for the man, Zeke?

Was it really a matter of distance?

He turned his gaze to the museum gates – open as they were – and raising his head, he declared, ‘Dad, I don’t want you here. I want you to go.’ Because he understood now that it was the ignominy these memories provoked that really stirred him: the fact that he could never get that fire, that coal shovelling out of his head, remembering how his father stooped and stood, stooped and stood, endlessly feeding those flames. How he hated those dark muscles, the black and sweating sinews of his neck, his arms, his shoulders as he stooped and stood, stooped and stood, shovelling like a navy.

Ah! There was a word, obliging Zeke to look down, considering his hands—his arty hands – their pale difference.

‘It can’t be right to think like this,’ he groaned. ‘It can’t be. Not with what I know. Not with what I believe. Our humanity ...’

So he stood to assert himself and as he did his shadow stretched, reminding him of that other, and lifting his head he declared, ‘That’s it. Dad, I want you to leave. And when you go, remember this: just as you shovelled coal into those boilers, these hands shovelled food into your mouth. Without mum to feed you, to clean up after you, I had to – yes, with these lily-whites – but you were too far gone to care. And let’s not forget the rest of the years that you put me through hell. No, I didn’t need any uni course to preach the truth of Moloch’s fires⁵ – I’ve seen the flames that prove it. Ah, so you *do* remember your shovelling! But now you’re calling me back; now you’re asking if we could have done better. Well that’s what I’m here to find out: to take a look at myself – ourselves – all of us; the whole kit and caboodle. And if I can do that – *if*, mind you – me and my lily-whites are going to re-create that past as a future. So step aside and let me get on with it.’

And shouldering his satchel – a trifle unsteady – he turned to enter the museum.

Endnotes

1. Eran, Neuman 2010 'Psychoanalysing architecture: the uncanny, the libido and the built environment', *Hagar* 10(1): 23-35.
2. Dickens, Charles 2003 [1861] *Great expectations*, Michigan, The Toby Press: 64-5.
3. Andersen, Hans Christian 1998 [1997] 'The shadow', *The complete fairy tales*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions: 370.
4. Andersen, Hans Christian 1998 [1997] 'The shadow', *The complete fairy tales*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions: 370.
5. Milton, John 2008 [1667] *Paradise lost*, Great Britain, Oxford University Press: 15-16; lines 389-95.

Research statement

Research background

Museum piece arises from my long term ‘love affair’ with the Old Queensland Museum. My creative response was triggered by a journal article claiming ‘a psychoanalysis of architecture might be possible ... that would reveal, by implication, and reflection, its relationship to its subjects’ (Eran 2010: 31).

Research contribution

Establishing my writing as scholarship allows me to extend my research into the influence of architecture on fiction as previously exemplified in my essays, short stories and novels. The creative extract attached is from an experimental novel in which Zeke, the adult protagonist – who ‘might be me’ but ‘might prove to be you’ – explores both his personal and cultural past by psychoanalysing the heritage listed Old Queensland Museum and its post-colonial contents. This exploration necessarily involves ‘the collapsing of the “detached” and all-knowing subject into the text’ which constitutes elements of the ‘deforming’ genre of fictocriticism (Muecke 2002: 108) while allowing me to further extend my practice-led research into phenomenology.

Research significance

Museum piece is a work of fictocriticism, which is usually considered more of an academic than traditional, commercially marketable narrative, genre. *Museum piece* demonstrates innovative creative writing research in practice, including the fusion of personal memoir, fiction, historical non-fiction, literary criticism and post-colonial theory integrated within a corpus of architectural writing to create a commercially publishable, novel-length work of fictocriticism.

Works cited

- Eran, Neuman 2010 ‘Psychoanalysing architecture: the uncanny, the libido and the built environment’, *Hagar: studies in culture, policy and identities* 10(1): 23-35
- Muecke, Stephen 2002 ‘The fall: fictocritical writing’ *parallax* 8(4): 108-12