



Author **Peter Skrzynecki** lectures in Australian and American literature in the School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney and was a teacher with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. **Lorraine Antonini**, recently retired from Willoughby Girls High School where she taught HSC English (ESL), spoke to Peter about his writing.

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An interview with Peter Skrzynecki

Introduction

Peter's works include eight collections of poetry, two novels, two collections of short stories, and the editing of two volumes of contemporary Australian writing. One of Peter's anthologies, *Immigrant chronicle*, is a prescribed text for Stage 6 English Standard and Advanced (Area of Study: *Changing perspective*); and Stage 6 English ESL (Area of Study: *Perspective*). The selected poems for study from *Immigrant chronicle* are: *Feliks Skrzynecki*; *10 Mary Street*; *Migrant hostel*; *Post card*; *Kornelia Woloszczuk*; *Crossing the Red Sea*; *Chronic ward*.

Lorraine: Peter, last year you were honoured with the Order of Australia Medal (OAM). What did this mean for you?

Peter: Well, the obvious answer is it's an honour, but it's something that I felt really belongs more to my parents than to myself. They are the ones who made the sacrifices; they went without so I could have a good education. I also I think my parents belonged to that generation of immigrants who lived behind what I call the grey suburban paling fences: they worked hard all their lives, died without leaving debts, contributed to Australia in a very honourable way but never had medals pinned on their chests. They died unknown. So I think the honour really belongs to them.

Lorraine: Do you feel that your writing and/or poetic style has changed over the years?

Peter: I think my poetry style has probably remained the same though there might be more lyricism in the poems now than there was in the free verse of the early days. My themes aren't just immigrant themes. For example, there are probably more nature poems than anything else, but there are also poems about personal relationships, the search for spirituality (*Easter Sunday*), what I call my 'baby poems', poems about my kids. But the immigrant theme always keeps coming back, probably because of my background. I have just been invited to Germany as one of ten Australian poets and the poems selected for translation, work shopping and publication over there are mainly the ones about the immigrant experience.

Lorraine: What ideas, issues and experiences interest you in your current writing and why?

Peter: My current writing is my autobiography which has taken three years of writing and rewriting and should soon be published. Poetry wise, I have been working on a new book of poems, a mixture of family poems, about my parents, and there also seems to be quite a lot of "vegies and flowers" there, tomatoes, roses and snapdragons, for example, which featured largely in our home in the old days. These figure in my writing more than I was aware of. There are also more landscape poems which I seem to have gone back to.

My aim in the near future is to put together a book of selected poems, selected by myself and an editor from all of my nine books, as I have never done that. But I also have an idea in my head for another prose book. After all, I have published two novels and two collections of short stories. I write all the time. It just happens in my head all the time. I keep a pencil and paper in the car and I write down ideas wherever I go. It's never been any other way.

Lorraine: Are there any times when the inspiration doesn't come for writing?

Peter: You go for periods when you don't write all the time but then there are times like when I was in my twenties, when I wrote three or four poems a day. I think actually poetry is a young person's thing and you turn to prose when you get older because it's more reflective, you can meditate more. Drying up has never really happened to me, and when it does it's not depression it causes, but fear that I won't write again. And then something starts to bug me again, irritate me, like friends who lost their homes in the fires in Canberra earlier this year.

Writing verse of course is easy, but poetry is different, it has to be genuine and come from 'somewhere else'. I believe in what the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, says in *The singer at the well*, "sing yourself to where the singing comes from", that place which we can't put our finger on, but which is where all poetry comes from. For me, Heaney and Les A. Murray are the only two poets in the world today who can be considered great. No poet can do with words what those two can.

Lorraine: You came to Australia as a young child and grew up here. What made you decide to write about the migrant experience, beyond the obvious reflection about your parents?

Peter: *Immigrant chronicle* was my third book and the first two were very much my response to my three years in one teacher schools in New South Wales, in the north west and on the north coast, mainly landscape and wildlife poems. Looking back on that time, it was three of the best years of my life though I hated it at the time, isolated and separated from my girlfriend and parents and all my mates were in Sydney. It was very lonely and threw you back on your own resources. So the first two books were in response to landscape, wildlife and environment, with a couple of family poems thrown in. That was early 1970s.

Then I got married, had a wife, two children, a house, mortgage, "the full catastrophe", as Zorba the Greek says, and I began to look at things differently. As a parent myself, I began to see my father and mother differently and to think about the sacrifices they had made, their migration and how that whole generation we were a part of, how they lived and settled in the western suburbs (of Sydney). And the poems came from that thinking, that meditating. A reviewer had

once said it was a pity I didn't write more about my European experiences and that must have been in the back of my mind too, acting like a trigger.

As a kid, many things pass you by, but as an adult later you start to appreciate things. When I visit schools I say to students, "you don't know what you've got until you lose it." I was at a school seminar once and heard a girl loudly criticising her father, on and on. I interrupted and asked her if she would rather have him or not have him. She stated, "Have him".

Lorraine: In some of the poems set for the HSC this year, could you explain what you mean in the final lines of the poem *Feliks Skrzynecki*, in particular the reference to Hadrian's Wall?

Peter: Hadrian's Wall, as you know, was built by the Romans to keep the Picts and the Scots out of England which they had conquered. So the wall is a division, a line of division, or generational gap if you like, that occurs between parents and children as the kids go into adolescence. The son is forgetting words, the father is helping him and sees that the education that his son is getting will one day take him away from home. The father says nothing because he knows there is nothing he can do to stop or change this. And the father has been through it all. The reference to "the dumb prophet" is a reference to Teiresias, the old man who had undergone metamorphosis. He had foreseen it all and suffered under the walls of Thebes. He does nothing and knows there is nothing he can do: what will be, will be. The movement south is towards education and the Australian culture and "civilisation", whatever that may be.

Lorraine: In the same poem why do you say of him "Happy as I have never been"?

Peter: As I say to students, if there is one word I could change in that book it would be that word "happy" to "content", because 25 years down the track, I think I have learned the difference between happiness and contentment. My father was always content in his life and I think that came from the fact that he had survived the war, he had had a second chance in life and he was his own man, working only for himself and his family, never to keep up with the Joneses. He was content. But when I wrote the poem as a young man, I didn't know what contentment was, so I used "happy". You learn the difference between contentment and happiness. Contentment comes at a price, I feel, when you go through all those stages of grieving and you realise that and value contentment as you age and experience life.

Lorraine: Is it fair to say that *Post card* seems quite a painful poem, with words like "haunts", "let me be" and "the gift of despair"?

Peter: I never thought of it as a poem that troubled me but when you throw up words like those it probably is more painful than I was ever prepared to think of it as being painful. Growing up, I was Australian, yes, but there was

this awareness as I got older of this other heritage and, having gone back to Poland and Germany, years after writing the poem, there is probably a fair bit of pain in it, yes. Of course, despite the connection to these places I could live in Ireland and I could live in Italy, I couldn't live anywhere else, but the irony is that I will never live anywhere else but Australia. It is home now.

Lorraine: Have you been to the Ukraine, to where your mother came from?

Peter: No, unfortunately I didn't realise how close I was on my earlier trip but it is not too late. I know the area she came from, the name of her village and I still have contact with the Ukrainian community, it's not too late.

Lorraine: And did you feel a sense of completion when you went back to Germany and Poland?

Peter: When I stood in the room I was born in, yes, very much so. That was like nothing else. The family my mother worked for as a domestic during the war was very good to us. They had wanted to adopt us and make us German citizens but she said "no, I've got my child and I want my freedom". Years and years later she tracked them down and I stayed with them for about two weeks when I went in 1989 and the daughter, my playmate, has visited here.

Lorraine: What is the significance of the bird imagery in your poem *Migrant hostel*?

Peter: Birds represent for me beauty and freedom and I love them. I've always had birds; finches and parrots. The birds in *Migrant hostel* are migratory birds which move from continent to continent with the seasons and we were like the migratory birds that came from one continent to another, then waited to move on; two years we waited in that camp before we moved on.

Lorraine: It has been reported that you were unhappy with the way *Kornelia Woloszczuk* has been interpreted by some critics. Can you explain why?

Peter: Because the critic paints my mother as some dark angel who had a chip on her shoulder because she only had one child. He's totally misinterpreted the poem and the Ukrainian/Polish saying at the end which he thought was a complaint. She is really paying me a compliment if you think of it. If you only have one eye and you lose it, your world becomes a world of darkness. She is actually saying "you are the light of my life". She always said to me "I wanted you" and a parent can't give a child any greater compliment than that. That's another way of saying "I love you".

Lorraine: How does the poem *Chronic ward* fit into the *Immigrant chronicle* collection? How do the ideas in this poem relate to the concept of perspective?

Peter: It was one of several poems that were put in that were not about the immigrant experience and I didn't make the final selection. *Chronic ward* is a response to Ken Kesey's

One flew over the cuckoo's nest. I saw the movie and read the book and had never read anything like it in my life. For example, I didn't know anything about lobotomies, I didn't know they existed. So the poem is a response to that. How does it fit into the *Immigrant chronicle* collection? Well, as a teacher said to me, the poem could be seen as a metaphor for suffering, which I think is the best explanation of all. A small marginalised group is treated differently.

It represents perspective because today we don't drill holes in people's heads and cut out parts of their brains. The key words are Jesus and Buddha, and their respective trees, the Cross and the Bodhi tree that Buddha sat under. Jesus taught love and Buddha taught compassion and we should treat people with love and compassion today. I also tell students if they want to broaden their answer they can talk about things today that once we could never talk about, like sexual abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness. We never talked about things like suicide, and depression, they were swept under the carpet. Now we know that depression is much more common, it's genetic and there's no shame. We know that these problems aren't going to go away. The way to overcome them is to confront them. In retrospect, times have changed, we no longer lock people up in asylums, we don't call them loonies or crazies, and we treat them with love and compassion, as human beings. ■

Book rap Term 2, 2003

Peter Skrzynecki Stage 6 English *Standard and Advanced* (Area of Study: *Changing perspective*); Stage 6 English ESL (Area of Study: *Perspective*). Peter will be available online during the book rap to support students participating in the book rap. This exciting online opportunity will run from weeks 5 to 8 in Term 2. The date for schools to subscribe will be posted on the **School Libraries and Information Literacy** web site at <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries/teaching/raps/index.htm>

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