

WORK- ING HOT:

A BOOK, ITS PUBLISHERS, THE AUTHOR AND HER READER

BY ALISON RAVENSCROFT

1. MILIEU

I remember its arrival with an almost maternal fondness (yes, I recognise my own nostalgia). It was delivered like a baby left on a doorstep, a bulky bundle wrapped in brown paper. Inside was a dense, single-spaced type-script on foolscap with lines of type extending to the edges of the long narrow sheets. It had been produced on a manual typewriter obviously well past its prime: the letters were thick and ink-filled, making it impossible to distinguish between most vowels. (Which misspellings were deliberately playing with meaning, and which were merely the typewriter's limits?) Turning to the opening pages, I read:

'Milieu'

this humourised surrealised serialised pack-of-love life

translate this sentence they all laughed when the dog tore her pretty dress

'it's just simple things I wanted to tell people they are such simple things and they can stop so much suffering things like always wet your hands before you pick up a frog it stops them from being so frightened'

Percy Edwards

'... and I always bring up the very same deceptively lines pieces of a treasure buried alive ever since the world's beginning.' Gender

no milieu

nothing to speak of

I was startled by its strange beauty. It was like a joke with a sob at its heart. The year was 1986, the publisher Sybylla Press, a feminist printery and publisher operating from a shopfront in Smith Street, Fitzroy, where the odour of ink and solvent washed over us all day and the sound of the presses, sometimes slow, sometimes frantic, filled our minds like a locomotive pulling through a station. The typescript would become Kathleen Mary Fallon's *Working hot*, published in 1989 to critical acclaim.

Twelve years later, *Working hot* has been republished by Vintage/Random House. It is in many ways a different book to the one first produced all those years ago under the sign of Sybylla. The name remains the same, but the range of meanings available to the text do not. Different discourses now circulate about desire, gender and textuality, which open this text to new readings. What meanings are opened up and what closed, and what the conditions are of this poesis, are compelling questions. The questions raised by the newly issued *Working hot* are relevant for any of us interested in the conditions of possibility for critical cultural practice. What is the milieu in which a critical work such as *Working hot* can be written, published, and, just as importantly, read?

When the original typescript of *Working hot* arrived at Sybylla Press in 1986 it was read within a heady mix of materialist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and 'postmodern' feminisms. The body of theory loosely known as French feminism had entered into circulation in Australia in the early 1980s when English translations of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva became more readily available. The theorisations of language, power and desire offered by these French feminists were still new to English-speaking audiences and were in tension with the British and US feminisms that had so profoundly shaped Australian feminisms up to this point. The significance of *Working hot* in the late 1980s lay in part in its historicity. Here was a text that self-consciously and intelligently engaged with the newly emerging feminist discourses that were part of the context of its

production, and which described some of the new tensions and uncertainties that marked the Australian feminist landscape as it was remade in the context of these new discourses. Some of the certainties of the older feminisms were being undone, especially in the wake of the challenges made by French feminism, and *Working hot* both described and contributed to this remaking of Australian feminism.

What kind of meanings, then, could a text like *Working hot* hold in this particular context? Reading the typescript in 1986, *Working hot* was for me a text that spoke of the fascism of desire and the erotics of power; the ethics of exchange and the possibilities of reciprocity; the impossibility of certainty and fixed truths. It was an anti-authoritarian text that, among other things, wrote against the authority conventionally conceded to the author. It was also about the problematics of reading and writing practices and the politics of representation. What meanings are representable? When does representation reproduce the violences it seeks to disclose? What are the ethics of writing and reading, of attempting to say anything, anything at all? Can we speak to each other? Can we hear? These ways of reading *Working hot* were not idiosyncratic. They too were formed in the context I have been describing: the tension between on one hand the priorities of an older feminism, in my case a Marxist feminism, and the challenges called out by poststructuralism and postmodernism on the other.

When *Working hot* was published in 1989, feminist theorists and commentators sensed that this book marked a significant moment in Australian feminist writing and publishing. For Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, this text was unprecedented in Australian publishing in the ways it sought different forms of representation of women's experiences.¹ For Sneja Gunew, *Working hot* was important for the critical work it did with theorisations of the power and politics of language. For Gunew the text was erotic, but these erotics were not to be understood as being simply about sex, but of the peculiar pleasures of the word.² For Melissa Hardie *Working hot* was a text that needed 'to be read in, and against, a formidable array of cultures and contexts: social, literary, political and sexual'. It 'insists upon the sexual specificity of these various modes of discourse; dedicated to the lovers of texts, it insists upon the violence done through and with fictions of being and experience'.³ Dedicated 'to lovers of texts' rather than lovers, *Working hot*

was seen as critiquing the fictions of love and sex. For Rosemary Sorensen and Jenna Mead, *Working hot* was 'combative'; it 'offers you critique and representation and possibility in a form that flatly refuses to let you take it lying down'.⁴ That is, *Working hot* was read in terms of debates current at the time concerning language and desire, power and representation, the possibilities of resistance, transgression and subversion.

The debates that framed *Working hot's* writing and reading in the 1980s were of their time and place. How then might *Working hot* be read now, twelve years on, when these debates have themselves been developed and in some ways superseded by, for instance, the advent of 'queer theory'? What are the conditions under which the text now takes its meanings? As a way of approaching this question, I want to turn to the Vintage/Random House edition and see what the new publishers have done with *Working hot*. Into what world of meanings might a publisher like Random House seek to insert this complex and volatile text?

It seems that in the eyes of *Working hot's* new publishers, this text is best read as a naughty novel about sex. It has been sent into the world wrapped in a cover blurb of banal sexual innuendo. (Was the joke about the cunning linguist the only one the marketing department understood?) On the back cover, two soft-pink nipples nudge at the edges of the page, and the blurb talks the text into the pliant shape of porn: 'these women find white hot ways to work', 'they lay claim to their own desires and maintain their love and lust'. 'Are they strong-willed and foul-toned enough', the blurb asks, 'to maintain this erection into language?' (ardon?)

Reviews of the first edition are quoted on the back cover in ways that emphasise the sexual references in the text, making sex simple and taking it outside the contexts of these critics' wider arguments (and outside their historical moment: these comments on the text are now twelve years old).

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1. Elizabeth Grosz's comments were invited by Sybylla Press for the back cover blurb of the Sybylla edition, 1989.
 2. From Sneja Gunew's speech at the Sybylla launch of *Working hot* at Raw Gallery, Fitzroy, December 1988.
 3. Melissa Hardie, 'Body language', *Southerly*, December 1989, 49(4), p. 658.
 4. Rosemary Sorensen and Jenna Mead, 'Subversive desire: feminist writing', *Age monthly review*, June 1990, 10(2), p. 17

So Elizabeth Grosz chiefly admires the text's 'love, passion, lust', or so the quote from the new book implies; Sneja Gunew says that *Working hot* is 'the most erotic book [she had] ever encountered'; Melissa Hardie says the book is 'daring and dazzling', sweet words to a publicist's ears. At the same time there is a rather peculiar coyness towards the sexuality that is one of the text's preoccupations and that is same-sex desire. Nowhere on the new cover is there a suggestion of lesbianism, or queer. The text is now offered to the reader as a celebratory account of sexual practice, where that practice, because not otherwise marked, can be taken to be heterosexual by the unsuspecting.

Working hot's new cover evokes some meanings and elides others; it covers over the text's impulses towards complexity, critique and uncertainty and in their stead erects a semblance of order, certainty and authority. It does this by the kind of moves it makes in its representation of the text in its blurb and it does it too with the images used on the cover, not only the disembodied nipples on the back cover but also through the treatment given to the image on the front. This remarkable image was first used on the front cover of the Sybylla edition. It is a detail from Cernak's thirteen-panelled artwork *The fall* (1986), and was chosen by the author. Central to this enigmatic image is a naked female figure. In her raised hand she holds a mirror in which is reflected the immobile, open-mouthed face of death. From her back emerges another figure, bald and delicate as if just born, her twin. Birth and death, past and future, desire and dread, are here rendered irreducibly. This central figure's own ambiguous temporal placement is suggested by her oddly hairless genitals, a disturbing image recalling both the body of a child and that of an old woman for whom death is proximate, even held in the hand. There are meanings, then, that adhere to that hairless body that reach beyond those that can be comfortably circumscribed by dominant notions of desirable female bodies. But this complex image has undergone what surely is a kind of censorship on the cover of the new *Working hot*. Kathleen Mary Fallon's name is now made to cross this image in a way which hides the figure's hairless genitals. The name of the author has been used to cover some of the meanings available to the image and, by extension, the text. The hairless body, if it had been allowed to stay, might have risked evoking for the bookshop browser a world of meaning far from the realm of 'hot sex' and other marketable fantasies.

I want to resist a reading that reduces *Working hot* to a text simply about sex rather than, say, a critique of the erotics of power and the disorder of desire, but more than this I resist *any* reading that anchors this text to a single meaning. This is a text that, surely, refuses fixed meanings and order, that writes against authoritarian certainty and the 'knowing' subject produced in its wake. In the centre of this book is a tiny story called 'Close enough to the heart of the matter'. This is set in larger type and with a *faux* woodcut illustration, like a fairytale book, in order to suggest the fanciful nature of its protagonist's conceptions of truth and her own authority. For this is the story of Archangel Mademoiselle Montgolfier who with forceps dissects the human heart and faced with its workings finds her own 'placid and angelic serenity and certainty as profoundly lacking, unconvincing, disgusting even'. The interior chambers of the dissected heart are scored with marks, the record of a life—'inscriptions, erasures and reinscriptions'—which Montgolfier seeks to transcribe but before which she remains astonished and uncomprehending. The 'human' she observes is awash in the ceaseless tide of impulses and information that, Montgolfier observes to her dismay, she cannot simply transcribe or decode after all. She will never know the human subject with certainty, however long she examines the marks it makes in its efforts to write and rewrite a record of itself.

This small story shows something of *Working hot's* more general resistance to those reading practices that hope to find a narrative making steady progress towards its object. Instead, like the narrative inscribed on the chambers of the human heart, *Working hot* moves forwards *and* in recoil. The text describes a chronology with only a tentative, delicate attachment to the workings of mechanical time. Instead it is memory and the reader's own desires that order its narrative. The Sybylla edition carried some design features intended to problematise conventional reading practices and so support these same impulses in the text itself. For instance, in order to suggest that its narratives be understood as beginning and then beginning again, rather than progressing towards a close, in the Sybylla edition each chapter opens with its own title page with a black-and-white image, reminiscent of a book's frontispiece. The images used were startling. Like the cover, they were taken from Cernak's *The fall*.

But the new publishers haven't included these black-and-white images on the opening pages, perhaps to avoid buying reproduction rights. The effect of this and other design decisions is that, visually, the new book is made to conform more closely to the conventional novel and the reading practices associated with it. The physical form of this book suggests that there will be a progression in the narrative toward a satisfying end, a promise which the text of *Working hot* does not fulfil.

2. THE READER AND THE WRITER

The practices of writing and reading and the relationship between writer, reader and text are some of *Working hot's* subjects. *Working hot* tells of letters written but never read; of the uncertain and random readership of a message in a bottle; of faxes and telexes and internal university mail; of graffiti on the backs of toilet doors. These texts' 'meanings' are as excitable and mobile as the bodies which write and read them. And, in case the reader thought she could anchor the text's meanings more securely if she knew something of the writer, the author's bio note throws her off the scent. In the Sybylla edition, Fallon wrote her own bio note, cleverly playing with the ideas about author/ity that run through *Working hot*:

Kathleen Mary Fallon was born in Monto, Queensland in 1951 and grew up in Brisbane ... *Working hot* was written during periods of employment on various trade and sporting magazines including *Packaging News*, *Refrigeration Monthly* and *Modern Boating and Fishing* and in bars, cafes, buses and trams. She lives in Sydney where she is presently working on *Establishing A Credit Rating* and *A More Convincing Curriculum Vitae*.

What's 'true' and what's 'fiction' are here undecidable and the reader is dissuaded from attaching meanings to a text through what can be inferred about the writer. The author is not a site of fixed meanings any more than the text is, and the reader herself must make sense of the text she holds in her hands. (The new edition carries a more conventional author's note, a more convincing *curriculum vitae*.)

One of the questions posed by the reissue of *Working hot* is 'Who will its readers be?' Who will the new *Working hot* call up as its readers, and what meanings will they make of it? I've suggested that the original edition of *Working hot* attracted a feminist readership interested in the newly available

analyses of gender and in the debates they generated in the context of late 1980s Australian feminism. Feminism had in significant ways constituted the discursive conditions in which *Working hot* was written, and then edited in the context of Sybylla Press, and it constituted the conditions in which the text circulated among its community of readers. It was from this feminist communal context that the text took on much of its significance as a critical cultural work. It was feminist academics and critics who gave the book scholarly attention in academic journals and magazines, it was feminist academics who introduced the text to university book lists, it was feminists and their fellow travellers who judged *Working hot* to be the winner of the 1989 Victorian Premier's Award for New Writing. It was feminist readers who bought the book for themselves and friends, who borrowed it from one friend to lend to another, who passed the book around the way 'lovers of books' do, saying, 'Here, know this (know me).' In this communality, in this collective reading practice, lay some of the erotics of the book. *Working hot* was passed from hand to hand among a community of readers for whom this book was part of an ongoing exchange of ideas. This book, then, not only carried ideas but enabled and furthered a conversation between feminists in Australia at the time. This was part of the pleasure the book offered.

The cover blurb of the Random House edition recalls that the text once enjoyed a community of readers. However, it refashions that community, making it into something of a cultural elite. It does this by calling *Working hot* a 'cult classic', a term that fails to connote a feminist readership and instead suggests the romance of a literary or cultural underground, a community of canny readers for whom the text holds esoteric knowledge and codes. 'Cult classic', then, mobilises prior significances of the text while at the same time refusing the grounds on which those meanings were based. It shelters the text behind a façade of literary allusion, covering over the text's critical feminist impulses and history with something which in the end is more timid, albeit more alluring.

'Classic' also suggests that the meanings which *Working hot* once held for its readers can be fixed; it suggests that these meanings endure. Indeed, the 'cult' is understood as enduring as well, such that the new reader might even be able to take up a place in this elite circle of readers—this is the

promise held out to her. But the old meanings given to *Working hot* (and the circle of readers that the term 'cult' both refers to and refuses) are anachronistic. Any reading of *Working hot* cannot rely on an old set of meanings if it is to perform critical cultural work. The times in which the reader finds herself are very different from those in which *Working hot* was written and once read; the feminist critics quoted on the back cover would themselves presumably have different readings of the text now. Other discourses prevail. There are new cultural and political imperatives making the text available to other meanings.

One of those imperatives is the transcendence in Australia of the economies of the market and their new reach into intellectual and cultural life. This is the context of current critical cultural practice; it is the condition of its formation and must be one of the subjects of its critique. *Working hot* itself can be read as a text critiquing the push of the market, the logic of capital. Under capitalism, desires are raised, their fulfilment promised: we *can*, so the logic goes, grasp the object of our desire—we can shop for it. For me, now, the significance of *Working hot* lies precisely in its resistance to capitalism's faith in progress and the pursuit of the object, capitalism's promise of fulfilled desire. *Working hot* describes the repeated failure to reach the object of desire; it reiterates the fact of unattainability; it refuses to bring any of its narratives to a satisfying close; it refuses any position of absolute authority, including its own. These meanings seem newly pressing in the context in which I read *Working hot* now, yet they are the very meanings that have been foreclosed by the ways this book is now offered to the reader. The new publishers of *Working hot* are offering us an object as if it can be grasped, one that will titillate and fulfil, an object that promises fixed and certain knowledge: 'If we learn to listen well, their words might tell us what that old girl is singin' out about, way back-a-beyond.'⁵ There is a gap between the way *Working hot* has been packaged and the text that lies under the wrapping, a text that simply refuses to tell us what anyone has to sing about. Hopefully, readers interested in critical cultural practice will not judge this book by its cover.

5. From the cover of the Vintage/Random House edition of *Working hot*, 2000.