



Margaret Simons. Photo: Hans Bool.

## Preferring “Dirty” to “Literary” Journalism: In Australia, Margaret Simons Challenges the Jargon While Producing the Texts

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**Abstract:** Australian literary journalism has neither a discrete nor recognizable community of authors as compared to the United States and the United Kingdom. Writers do not label themselves as such and most are surprised when it is suggested their work falls within the parameters of Northern Hemisphere specificities for the genre. Commensurate with contemporary international examination, more than fourteen years ago preliminary debate was initiated about the term “creative nonfiction” in an attempt to identify a national canon. In recent years, two other terms, “book-length journalism” and “long-form journalism,” have been offered but none ever seem to settle. The determination to find a label has its genesis within the academy and, mostly, only those writers who work within the academy or have done so are privy to the debates. Academic, journalist, author, and social commentator Margaret Simons prefers to speak of “disinterested” and “dirty” journalism rather than “literary,” yet ironically she has produced some of Australia’s most highly regarded literary journalism. This paper examines Simons’s multilayered perspective and her literary journalism, focusing especially on *The Meeting of the Waters: The Hindmarsh Island Affair*.

There is no doubt Australians enjoy nonfiction reading and turn to books, through whatever technology, in order to access it. But identifying a community of Australian literary journalists—or, as they are more commonly known, creative nonfiction authors—equivalent to the vibrant communities of the Northern Hemisphere is problematic. Australian creative nonfiction writers do not identify themselves as such. Academic Nigel Krauth has written:

At the conference in Albany I walked in the door of the huge central display room where more than a hundred publishers were showing their wares. I immediately got into discussion with a gentleman whose desk was covered with Creative Nonfiction Magazines. I picked up a couple of his publications and flicked through them.

“We do this stuff in Australia,” I said. “We don’t call it Creative Nonfiction. We call it writing.”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, Krauth’s conversation partner was not impressed. Or as Krauth wrote at the time: “He looked at me archly.”<sup>2</sup>

In the same special issue of *TEXT* dedicated to creative nonfiction in Australia, academic Donna Lee Brien wrote: “Creative nonfiction is currently a highly visible literary and publishing phenomenon in the United States. . . . Australians have been writing creative nonfiction in various guises for decades, but it has not been identified as such.”<sup>3</sup>

That was fifteen years ago. Lee Brien wrote then of the need for a “meaningful way to group, discuss and publish”<sup>4</sup> diverse Australian nonfiction writing. The discussion has not happened in this country, or happened among only a small number of practitioner/academics in various universities but never granted cultural gravitas.<sup>5</sup>

### **Book-Length Journalism in Australia**

Since then, further research into technological impact throws up differing statistics. In 2010, the Books Alive program<sup>6</sup>—rebranded as Get Reading!—gathered data from the 2010 national online survey. Figures showed that thirteen percent of Australians who had read a book for pleasure downloaded an e-book from the Internet in the twelve months prior to the survey. Further, the survey reported that ten percent read on a mobile phone, personal digital assistant or laptop, and six percent used a reading device or e-book reader.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, publishers had to redefine what the term “book” meant. As Shona Martyn, publishing director of HarperCollins in Australia and New Zealand, said: “Australians have always been in the top three book consumers, along with New Zealand and the Netherlands. . . . [I]n terms of total numbers of books sold or downloaded, the number is actually up.”<sup>8</sup>

The discussion of what now constitutes a book in this country is pertinent. In 2004, of the top 150 book titles sold in Australia, sixty-six, or forty-four percent, were nonfiction. Of these, twenty-eight, or nineteen percent of the total, could be classed as creative nonfiction.<sup>9</sup> In the latest figures released, 2008, fifty-nine percent of the books sold in this country were nonfiction, compared to twenty-five percent fiction.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, academic Matthew Ricketson argues that long-form literary journalism, or what he also terms

book-length journalism, is “a vibrant part of the media industry” in Australia.<sup>11</sup> In fact, most substantial creative nonfiction can be found in long-form literary or book-length journalism.<sup>12</sup> Ricketson positions journalism on a scale of length, from hard news to features to book-length journalism. He also posits another range, where book-length journalism sits in the middle between daily journalism and novels.<sup>13</sup> I will discuss a new model of identification proposed by Ricketson below, but first I will provide a synoptic and current look at Australian female journalists within the newsroom environment, some of whom produce literary journalism.

### **Book-Length Journalism in Australia and Female Writers**

There is a strong history of women working within the Australian journalism industry.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the situation in other countries, most female writers traditionally were confined to the so-called women’s pages, and like in most countries, “the great shift for Australian women in journalism, as in so many professions, came with the advent of the Second World War.”<sup>15</sup> Another change occurred in the 1960s and ’70s, as women refused to be marginalized by their gender and stepped into the journalism mainstream. Michelle Grattan became political correspondent for *The Age* newspaper in 1971 and by 1976 was the paper’s chief political correspondent in Canberra. Anne Summers rose to prominence as a journalist with the *National Times* in Sydney from 1975, following the publication of her book *Damned Whores and God’s Police*.<sup>16</sup> Currently, there are many female journalists spread throughout the country, across all media, but there are still major gender inequity issues. Like their male counterparts, Australian female journalists, if they do produce book-length literary journalism, do so while maintaining their daily/weekly journalism profiles. Any literary journalism produced is achieved in addition to daily work in newsrooms. That said, from the research below it is clear that newsroom hierarchy tends to adversely affect female journalists, which limits opportunities for the freedom and time to write at length.

Academic Louise North presented research in her text *The Gendered Newsroom: How Journalists Experience the Changing World of Media*<sup>17</sup> as a means to tease out themes she believed were embedded throughout the Australian print industry. She claimed these themes were lack of merit-based promotion and how this differs for male and female journalists; disparity in story allocations, with hard news still often seen as a male domain; and sexual harassment in the newsroom. Another key theme was the dominance of men in senior editorial positions.<sup>18</sup> North followed up this research with a more comprehensive study—a nationwide survey of 577 female journalists, across all media—finding that “there is still widespread gender discrimination in our

newsrooms.”<sup>19</sup> She wrote, “It is widely acknowledged by media scholars, feminist media researchers and industry groups that newsrooms around the world are dominated numerically by men, and that men occupy the majority of senior editorial decision-making roles.”<sup>20</sup> She continued, “Women journalists are typically located en masse in low-paid, low-status positions, struggling to attain real influence in editorial decision making roles across all media platforms.”<sup>21</sup>

North found that as of August 2012 there was not one female editor heading any of Australia’s twenty-one metropolitan newspapers, and only three editing a weekend newspaper. One of her most astonishing findings—compared to a study carried out sixteen years previous—was that there had been an increase in female Australian journalists experiencing sexual harassment, with 57.3 percent admitting having experienced “objectionable remarks or behaviour” from male colleagues in the newsroom compared to 51.6 percent in 1996. Journalist Candice Chung summed up these findings, writing, “As North points out, for an industry that ‘shines light on gender inequity in other occupations,’ the media has failed miserably at investigating their own gender issues.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite these difficult issues, Australia has produced several notable women authors that might be classified as literary journalists, including Anne Summers, Estelle Blackburn, and Marian Wilkinson. And there are others. Chloe Hooper, for instance, produced a highly respected and multi-award-winning book-length piece of literary journalism, *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island*,<sup>23</sup> although she herself is not a journalist. Helen Garner is not a journalist either, but she is the author of several renowned books that have been categorized as literary journalism, including *The First Stone*<sup>24</sup> and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*.<sup>25</sup> Anna Goldsworthy, yet another nonjournalist, has produced two highly acclaimed memoirs as well as a critical and analytical long-form essay for the *Quarterly Essay* on the tenure of former prime minister Julia Gillard, “Unfinished Business: Sex, Freedom and Misogyny.”<sup>26</sup> Goldsworthy also writes regular essays for *The Monthly*. But of the handful of contemporary Australian journalists who also produce literary journalism, the author, academic, and social commentator Margaret Simons is one of the best known and most highly respected. Simons seemingly defies North’s research, possibly because she has removed herself from the newsroom environment. Her work straddles both the media industry as a commentator and the education sector as a journalism program director.

### **A True-Story Teller**

Although Simons is prominent within the journalism field in Australia, where she has produced some distinguished pieces of literary journalism, she

has little if no international profile. Both Hooper's and Garner's books have found audiences outside their home country, but Simons's work tends to stay in Australia and be specifically about Australia, although it is easily accessible to an international readership. She has written eleven books,<sup>27</sup> including recently *Self-Made Man*, the biography of media proprietor Kerry Stokes, and, with former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs*.

Not all of Simons's books are works of literary journalism. Some are fiction, and some are straight journalism. In this paper I will focus on *The Meeting of the Waters: The Hindmarsh Island Affair* as an exemplar of the sort of long-form contemporary writing occurring in Australia that has deep political and cultural impact and significance. This award-winning book<sup>28</sup> generated both heated debate and revelation throughout the country. Her investigation into the battle between local Aboriginal people living near Hindmarsh Island in South Australia, and developers wishing to build a bridge between the mainland and the island during the 1990s, is both comprehensively researched and starkly troubling. The story goes beyond its immediate telling to reflect the troubled divide between indigenous and white Australia—a metaphor, so to speak, of a simmering but still current disconnect.

Simons completed her cadetship, or training, at *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, then worked as an arts reporter, a feature writer, a consumer affairs specialist, a Freedom of Information legislation authority, and an investigative journalist.<sup>29</sup> For three years, 1986–89, she worked as Brisbane correspondent for the paper during the time of the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police and political corruption.<sup>30</sup> Currently she is the media commentator for *Crikey*, an online, independent news outlet, and director of the Centre for Advancing Journalism and coordinator of the master of journalism program at University of Melbourne. She lives in Melbourne with her husband and two children.

Simons left *The Age* newsroom after nearly ten years in order to write her first novel, *The Ruthless Garden*.<sup>31</sup> She wrote her second, *The Truth Teller*, after moving from Melbourne, Victoria, to the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, where she started her family. She became a single mother in the late 1990s. She says:

I don't write because of the money, but I have to earn money. I've got children and a mortgage like everybody else. I could earn more money doing virtually anything else or doing different kinds of writing. One very tough time in my life, when my relationship with my children's father was breaking up, I remember driving—there's that beautiful time of day when all the cliffs are really orange—and I remember looking at the escarpment and

thinking, “What am I? What am I?” And the answer came back, “I’m a mother and I’m a writer.” That is what I am and I don’t think it’s in my power to change it.<sup>32</sup>

Simons has a simple attitude to what she does:

I tell true stories when I’m writing what you call nonfiction, and I use that term, too, because I have failed to come up with a better one. Narrative journalism is the one I feel most comfortable with, but that’s only because it’s got an absence of negatives about it. Call it what you like—it doesn’t change the experience of writing it. It sounds so hackneyed but it is really all the search for a meaning. Writing is a deeply mysterious process. Every time I write a book, my husband will tell you that I go around saying, “I’m never going to write another book, I’ve lost it.” This is a constant and boring refrain. I try to stop myself from doing it because I know it sounds ridiculous, but it feels real.<sup>33</sup>

As a freelance and a young mother, Simons continued to write weekly columns for *The Australian* newspaper. A compilation of her columns, *Wheelbarrows, Chooks & Children*, illustrated by Anna Warren, was published in 1999. That same year, *Fit to Print: Inside the Canberra Press Gallery* was published. Meanwhile, she began research for the Hindmarsh Island book. She wrote, “I came to realize the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair was not an article or an essay, but a book full of largely untold stories. I also decided I should not write a word until I was ready.”<sup>34</sup> Simons spent four years researching *The Meeting of the Waters*, which was published in 2003. She says:

It’s the most important thing I’ve done but it didn’t sell brilliantly. It did all right, won an award—I’m not complaining, but it’s certainly not a mass-market book. You have to trust books to find their readers—anything else drives you mad. I can’t remember how much that book sold, but it wouldn’t be more than 2,000 or 3,000 copies. A lot of those went into libraries and it seems to turn up in all sorts of places, so it found its readers and it had an influence beyond its immediate readership.<sup>35</sup>

As a writer, journalist, and academic, Simons presents a noteworthy blend of trade and scholarly approaches. The text swaps between the lyrical writing of a poet, the forensic detective skills of a committed investigative journalist, and the rigor of an academic. As part of earlier research,<sup>36</sup> out of ten Australian writers Simons was one of only two who knew about the term “creative nonfiction,” and the debate on labelling this form of long-form journalism. Despite how masterfully she executes this type of writing, she does not care for the current terminology, finding discussion about objectivity far more interesting. She says:

Kovach and Rosenstiel talk about journalism as being akin to a scientific method. You start with a hypothesis, but then you just go out and challenge your hypothesis and be prepared to have it disproved. In other words, be prepared to be wrong and to change your mind. The objectivity lies not in the journalist and not necessarily in the final result, but in the method. That definition of objectivity makes sense to me. But I prefer to use terms like journalism with integrity, or disinterested journalism, meaning you're not gunning for a particular result. This is one of the things we have to find a way of keeping, because most citizen journalism is interested journalism, in the sense of opposite of disinterested. It doesn't necessarily mean that there's anything wrong with that, but it is very important that the idea of disinterested journalism survives as well. We're in the middle of a profound paradigm shift and there are many more questions than answers about just about everything.<sup>37</sup>

Simons cites academic Jason Wilson and his version of the question: When is a person a journalist; and if what he or she produces is journalism. She says: "‘When am I a journalist?’ is a better question, and ‘When am I not?’ That is the question. When am I a journalist; what part of what I do is journalism? Most good journalistic stories lie in the gap between what's meant to happen and what actually happens."<sup>38</sup>

Further, in terms of labelling what she does, Simons finds the North American terminology troubling. She believes the term "dirty" is an integral notion of journalism:

Part of my problem with the term "literary journalism" is the journalism bit. I would like to see a little bit more emphasis on the fact that the best of it is not just nice writing for the sake of nice writing, but *finding things out*. Journalism is still regarded by most people as a pretty lowly occupation. And to some degree there's a good reason for that. Journalism, finding things out, is actually very dirty work. Interviewing is very dirty work. When it's done well, it is always on the ethical edge, it almost always makes people seriously angry. So one of my other problems with literary journalism is that literary, in this country at least, implies something that's a bit stratospheric and up there and away from all the dirt and the push and the pull. Journalism, if it's to matter at all, has to stay dirty in the sense that I mean it.<sup>39</sup>

And the term creative nonfiction does not settle easily with her. She notes:

Creative nonfiction, the other term used for this kind of journalism, I also don't find very satisfactory because it seems to concentrate mostly on what it isn't. Also, the word "creative" confuses people who are not journalists. When I've raised that in nonjournalistic circles, they think it means that you're going to make things up. And the minute we allow that impression to get about, I think we're all done for. So I'm not happy with that term

either. I'm not sure that we're talking about anything special when we talk about literary journalism—I'm not sure that we're not just talking about stuff that's well written.<sup>40</sup>

Simons says that asking about creative nonfiction and its existence within the Australian literary community has more to do with literary criticism than with its execution. She says the categorization is “very much a literary critic comment—the sort of comment you make after it's written and you have to categorize it—a reader's comment, not a writer's comment. I mean, why do we have to worry about all that?”<sup>41</sup>

For some time Simons has been involved in the limited Australian debate on this issue of labelling, but sees no need for it. She says, “It bears the same relationship to writing that drama criticism does to acting. It doesn't really matter to doing it.”<sup>42</sup> She is far more interested in simply reporting and writing long-form journalism. The next section of this paper includes Simons's views on journalists' subjectivity. She posits the best remedy for this subjectivity is transparency—to flag to the reader that you are subjective. It also discusses *The Meeting of the Waters* within the context of a new model of identification framing book-length journalism, devised by Matthew Ricketson.

### Six Elements of Book-Length Journalism

Ricketson says there are six elements that make up Australian book-length literary journalism, and I hope to discuss them using Simons's Hindmarsh Island text. Ricketson formulated these elements “as a way of clarifying the nature and range of a field that straddles the print news media and book publishing.”<sup>43</sup> Ricketson claims the six elements<sup>44</sup> are works that: deal with actual events, people, and issues of the day; involve extensive research; employ a narrative approach; comprise many authorial voices; explore the underlying meaning of an event or issue; and have long-term impact. He writes:

[T]he value of book length journalism derives as much from the material disclosed as how it is written. . . . Value deriving from information disclosed sits well within well-established claims about the free flow of information in a democratic society; by that criterion alone, book length journalism carries weight. Housing this information in a well-constructed narrative magnifies the work's potential impact on readers.<sup>45</sup>

Simons is clear about the implicit subjectivity of journalists, but says the most important aspects are transparency and approaching the work as objectively as possible. She says, “It's quite possible for a journalist to approach a subject with a strong point of view. When you come to the sort of dedication and commitment of time that most book-length journalism pieces take, obviously the journalist is going to be writing about something that interests

them.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, some of Simons's language is loaded, but, as Pam O'Connor claims, "[I]t's almost impossible to be dispassionate about this subject."<sup>47</sup> O'Connor believes Simons is partisan, writing:

When I began reading *The Meeting of the Waters* I was hoping that, at last, here would be an objective study of this very controversial issue. However, I rapidly discovered where Simons stands. Parts of her book are as polemical as the opinions of the people involved. *The Meeting of the Waters* is an unashamed apologia, for the proponent women and their claims that if the bridge was built it would have serious consequences for Ngarrindjeri women, because the island was special to them for reasons they could not reveal.<sup>48</sup>

But she does add:

However there is also some good objective writing and the book represents four years of comprehensive research. . . . There is some validity in the author's claim that it's at the heart of how we perceive ourselves as a nation—and of what that perception means for the day-to-day experiences of Australians, black and white, and from many other cultures and races. The book forces us to look deeply at our political and racial attitudes.<sup>49</sup>

Although Simons admits she shifted her views during the course of her research, she maintains she attempts balance and transparency in her writing at all times. But as O'Connor writes of the Hindmarsh text:

The writing is refreshing. It ranges from unashamedly romantic, through chatty journalese, to taut factual language. Simons' wry throwaway lines not only entertain, they usually enlighten. However, there is a noticeable variation in the way Simons handles her material. Her language becomes more or less pejorative depending on whether she is dealing with the proponent or dissident women.<sup>50</sup>

Pejorative or not, Simons has certain criteria that she claims make for "good journalism." She lists not just evidence, but a "respect for evidence and openness to evidence." She also includes hard work and "the commitment that it takes to find things out. People think that's easy but in fact it's not—finding things out is very hard work." Simons's other criterion is to have an open mind or "the willingness to find and be open to evidence which contradicts your predisposed point of view."<sup>51</sup> She explains, "With literary journalism you have a strong narrative voice, an intelligence who is finding things out and telling you about them, who's making connections that you might not make yourself. It's full of value judgements, and when it's at its best it's fairly transparent about that."<sup>52</sup>

Applying Ricketson's six essential elements to the work of Simons, focusing on *The Meeting of the Waters*, I hope to demonstrate how her text is an

exemplar of Australian long-form literary or book-length journalism.

### **Hindmarsh Island Affair**

The story of Hindmarsh is complex but synoptically it involves a comprehensive and political clash of cultures and gender—white and black; men and women. Stakeholders in this story include state and federal politicians, lawyers, anthropologists, bureaucrats, developers, and, of course, Aboriginal people from both sides of the issue. Attempting to compile any balanced version of events is labor intensive and arduous. My main contention is that Simons attempts, executes, and completes the task, and as such complies with Ricketson's framework conclusively. She is analytical while attempting to maintain balance.

But seemingly, at the end of the research, she has a position. As she writes:

Aboriginal culture is periodically attacked for being nepotistic, secretive and not accountable. I believe the story of the Hindmarsh Island affair makes it clear that the similarities between cultures are often more interesting than the differences. We like to think of our culture as open. We value transparency as a democratic virtue. This was one of the reasons that the idea of secrets being used to stop development was so threatening and uncomfortable. But the story of the Hindmarsh Island bridge shows that, in both Aboriginal culture and in our own, information follows the lines of power, and secrets are the inevitable accompaniment to power. The white men who steered events behind the scenes in the Hindmarsh Island affair saw themselves as combating dangerous political correctness. I believe that in doing so they gave birth to a kind of anti-political correctness at least as silly, dangerous and ideologically blind to evidence as what it sought to replace.<sup>53</sup>

Hindmarsh Island is the largest of many small islands in the Lower Murray River, near Goolwa in South Australia, under sixty miles from Adelaide. It is situated in Lake Alexandrina and has fresh water on its northern side and salt water on its southern. The original people are the Ngarrindjeri. Early in the 1990s, there was a plan to build a bridge from the mainland in Goolwa to the island. Until then, access was via a public ferry. Local Ngarrindjeri women protested the building of the bridge, based on their secret women's business—cultural beliefs and rituals that could not be revealed to men, white or black. Much of their claim is that the island is imperative to fertility/abortion ritual, passed down from woman to woman for centuries. The women wrote to the federal government, stating their position and asking that the bridge not go forward. The appeal was successful, and the bridge building was halted. The secret women's business was written down and placed into two sealed envelopes, marked "Confidential: To be read by women only."<sup>54</sup>

Within a year, a separate group of Aboriginal women came forward and

stated that there was no secret women's business attached to the island and that the claim was a sham. A Royal Commission was convened and in December 1995 found that the secret women's business was pure fabrication. The bridge went ahead and was completed in 2001. That same year, Justice John von Doussa of the federal court heavily criticized the Hindmarsh Royal Commission's conclusion in a ruling. As Simons writes in her preface, "The finding . . . has echoed through Australian life since—in every controversy about Aboriginal land claims, and every discussion about the claims of pre-settlement history."<sup>55</sup>

Ricketson's first element—dealing with actual events, people, or issues of the day—is comprehensively fulfilled. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and well being are ongoing issues in modern-day Australia, as all matters relating to First Nations peoples must be in any colonizing nation. Discussing and taking action on questions pertaining to embedded belief systems and the culture of a minority First Nation people reflects international protocol, and how well a dominant nation achieves this is always subject to both domestic and international gazes, and political significance is attached to decision-making and policies.

Combining Ricketson's next three elements—extensive research, a narrative approach, and many authorial voices—again, it is clear Simons's work fits his paradigm. At 512 pages, Simons's book is thorough, extensive, and as transparent as she claims she could make it. At the back of her text, there are five pages entitled "List of Characters," fifty of whom Simons either interviewed or corresponded with. Qualitative inquiry with fifty people constitutes both "extensive research and many authorial voices." As Tonkinson writes: "A skilled writer whose prose flows effortlessly, Simons has synthesised a massive amount of material via research, interviewing, interpreting what was and was not said, unearthing fresh data, sorting message from meta-message, and engaging in much essential reading between the lines."<sup>56</sup>

Further, one of the integral Royal Commission "errors" Simons uncovers is an example of the "secret women's business" conveniently fabricated to stop the building of the bridge. Simons produces evidence that, indeed, this information was handed over to Rose Draper, a research assistant and the wife of Hindmarsh Island surveyor Neale Draper, well before the Royal Commission claimed. Simons asks why the person it was handed to was never called to give evidence.<sup>57</sup> She managed to track down Draper and interviewed her about this crucial information. She writes:

Rose was only intermittently in touch with her Adelaide family. They did not know where she was living. Finally, a member of her family found an old envelope from the previous year's Christmas card among rubbish in a

basement. On the back was a post office box number. I wrote to that address not expecting a result, but within days, Rose Draper rang me back.<sup>58</sup>

The Royal Commission had far greater financial resources than Simons, so her query about Draper's crucial testimony, told to her by Sarah Milera, custodian of Hindmarsh Island, is significant.

Simons's narrative approach is demonstrated through the extensive quoting of her sources as well as the lyrical way in which she writes. The opening lines of the text give some indication of the quality of her own narrative voice: "Some landscapes speak loud. Some seem mute. Where I live, in the Blue Mountains on the eastern coast of Australia, the landscape shouts at you."<sup>59</sup> Her narrative voice is both expressive and personable, but it has an edge, a sense that something is coming. There are also many lyrical moments in her text, juxtaposing the forensic and the academic. At one time she writes of the country causing deep consternation: "This country may be beautiful, but it is not pretty. There seemed today to be no flesh on the landscape, and nothing damp or comfortable. The Flinders Ranges were like bones. Everything else was flat. The waters of the gulf were still and warm, like blue oil."<sup>60</sup>

In her closing scene, Simons is the lone traveler. She writes:

I went to look at the bridge in the months after it was opened. . . . Then I drove back to the mainland, and started the long journey to the place I call home. . . . It was a very long drive. It took me more than one day. At times in the dream-like world of highway hum, I imagined I could see my journey from above—a car crawling across the continent like an insect on skin. Eastwards. Towards the future. . . . Driving towards the sunrise, yet always borne to the past.<sup>61</sup>

Simons is at her most poetic when concluding her text. Ultimately, she simply honors the country's First Nation and acknowledges its history, its differences, and its place in time. She also perhaps honors her own sense of longing for greater understanding.

Ricketson's final two elements—exploration of the underlying meaning of an event or issue, and impact—are what give *The Meeting of the Waters* its genuine contribution to knowledge. This drama unfolded daily in South Australia—reverberating in Canberra, then all around the country, and then back to South Australia—for many years. Much was written about the affair in Australian media, yet its complexity and political skew made it almost incomprehensible. Simons's text brings the many threads together and attempts to give a multilayered, transparent reading of events, contextualized within the political discourse of the day. Still, Simons does not preach her own beliefs, leaving it to the reader to decide.

The Hindmarsh Island affair broke within four years of the landmark High Court of Australia *Mabo v. Queensland* case, which overturned prior laws of *terra nullius* (meaning that Australia was empty land and subject to no proprietary rights) and recognized native title or rights to the land. The ruling, handed down June 3, 1992, began ten years earlier as a test case that brought to the court by Eddie Mabo, David Passi, and James Rice, all Merriam people from the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait. The case, known as *Mabo*, had an extensive political, legal, and cultural effect. Prime Minister Paul Keating stated as much in December 1993, during the passage of the Native Title Bill in Canberra:

[A]s a nation, we take a major step towards a new and better relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. We give the indigenous people of Australia, at last, the standing they are owed as the original occupants of this continent, the standing they are owed as seminal contributors to our national life and culture: as workers, soldiers, explorers, artists, sportsmen and women—as a defining element in the character of this nation—and the standing they are owed as victims of grave injustices, as people who have survived the loss of their land and the shattering of their culture.<sup>62</sup>

The legislation was a watershed moment in the history between white and black Australia. On the heels of *Mabo*—the Hindmarsh women’s secret business success, the subsequent Royal Commission findings of fabrication of 1995, and finally Justice von Doussa’s dismantling of those findings in 2001—were historically significant and polarized Australians both white and black. The initial findings of fabrication in 1995 can alternately read as an attempt to correct a shift in the political agenda, on the back of the *Mabo*’s impact. The timing and importance of Simons’s text cannot be disputed. As Kerry Goldsworthy writes in a 2003 review:

What Simons . . . sketches into her text is the rapid shifting-around of money and power in the background: economic boom and slump; the collapse of the State Bank of South Australia in 1991 and the fall of the Bannon Labor Government the following year; the effect that the *Mabo* decision of 1993 had on Australia’s white conservative landowners, businessmen and politicians; and the rapid growth and change in legislation throughout the 1980s and 1990s, at state and federal level, to do with Aboriginal issues and rights.<sup>63</sup>

Media discourse at the time of the Hindmarsh Royal Commission and subsequent findings was sometimes scathing, patronizing, and overtly racist. It was also sometimes rational and balanced, depending on the publication and the journalist. But what cannot be questioned is what Simons succinctly

writes at the end of her prelude: “[T]he story of Hindmarsh Island bridge is one of the most important that can be told about Australia at the end of the last century and the beginning of the next . . . it is one of those big, archetypal stories that tell us something about who we are.”<sup>64</sup>

This is a significantly Australian story. There may be similarities with other First Nation conflicts around the world, stories steeped in politics, power, men and women, race, the law, and money. But the Hindmarsh Bridge story is idiosyncratically Australian and its impact must not be forgotten. Simons’s text, and the polemical discourse it inspired throughout the media and in the homes of ordinary Australians, has helped to ensure that.

### Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss the work of academic, journalist, and author Margaret Simons, and position one of her texts as an archetype of the quality long-form literary or book-length journalism emanating from Australia. Contextualizing her work against current studies on women and the media in Australia, I hoped to establish that there were women among the mostly highly respected long-form writers in the country, despite these studies. Using Ricketson’s research, I hoped to demonstrate that Simons’s book, *The Meeting of the Waters: The Hindmarsh Island Affair*, fulfilled the six elements he defined as crucial to long-form or book-length journalism. Having done that, I hope to have held up her text as an exemplar of Australian long-form literary journalism. Of course, Simons’s story is complex and, as O’Connor writes, “[D]espite Simons’ conclusions, the critical reader will realise that there are still far more questions than there are answers.”<sup>65</sup>

Simons does not claim to have all the answers, but she has done the “dirty” journalistic work to enable readers to draw their own conclusions—always the signature of accessible literary journalism.

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## Notes

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