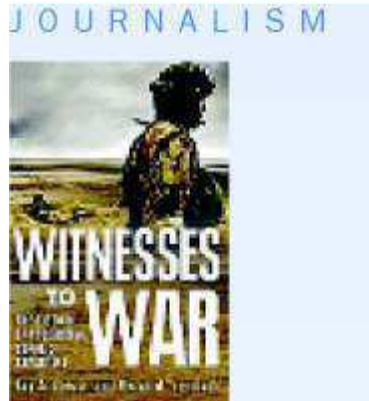




# OFF THE SHELF

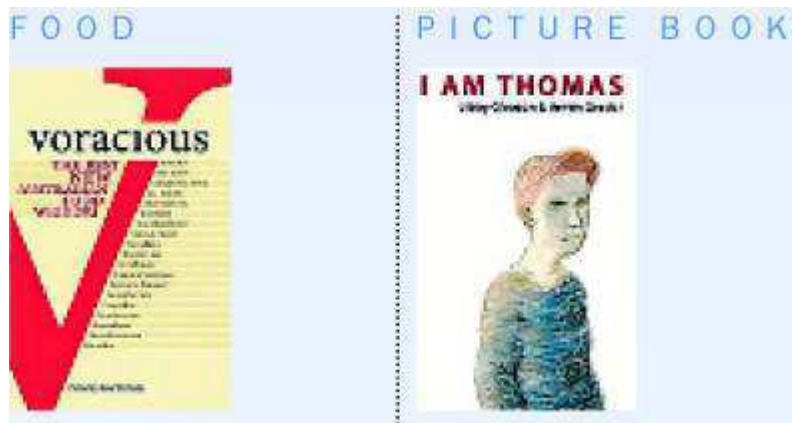


**WITNESSES TO WAR**  
 Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath  
 Melbourne University Press,  
 \$36.99

THE first Australian war correspondent was Howard Willoughby, later editor of *The Argus*, who in 1863 was present at the Battle of Waikato during the Third New Zealand War; and Banjo Paterson had a stint reporting the Boer War. But the form came into its own in two world wars, and one of the things this excellent book does is remind us how large a role in Australian history war reporters have played. If the Anzac legend is so much part of the Anglo-Celtic Australian imagination, we can thank writers such as Charles Bean and Chester Wilmot. They created the imagery and phrases that continue to be drawn on by the writers and editors who came after

them, and the politicians. So *Witnesses to War* isn't only a highly engaging and well-made work of media history, though it is that, but it also gives us a look up-close at the mechanics of nation-building.

There are the themes present for journalists of any country, which are a constant down to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: censorship and how to manage relationships with the military, and the perhaps unresolvable conflict between objectivity and the personal situation of the journalist, whether it results in over-identifying with the soldiers, or more general concerns about writing propaganda rather than real journalism. Then there are always the risks, physical and mental, that the correspondents undergo; Richard Trembath and Fay Anderson let the colour and drama, and the vivid personalities, into their text, but keep them at the right critical distance.



### VORACIOUS: THE BEST NEW AUSTRALIAN FOOD WRITING

Ed., Paul McNally  
 Hardie Grant Books, \$29.95

THE underlying premise of these newly commissioned essays by 19 food writers is the fact that we've become a nation that is weirdly obsessed by food. Matthew Evans's piece, *Not just Spuds*, is a good example of how we can get just a wee bit too excited when it comes to fanging. Referring to a friend who moved to Tasmania just for the potatoes, he goes on to do an orgasmic rave about the joys of pink-eyes.

While Gay Bilson openly acknowledges our preoccupation with food, it doesn't stop her from being downright sniffy about *MasterChef*, which she says is too far removed from the actual process of food to be taken seriously. On the other hand, in her essay, *Voices from an Australian Kitchen*, Jill Duplex sees such programs in a more positive light, in that they're turning a whole new generation on to cooking.

Possibly the more successful pieces here are those related to specific themes such as divorce and step parenting. In *Eat, Pray, Fight* Benjamin Law tells us about a father who filled his child with maraschino cherries before sending her home to her mother — "Revenge was sweet, possibly chunky." And in *A Repertoire of Acceptable Dishes*, Lucy Malouf describes the simple but mouth-watering dishes (minestrone, moussaka, banana cake) she cooked in order to entice her unhappy stepson.

There is no introduction here from Paul McNally, which is a shame as some context for the essays may have made the general whiff of triteness less obvious.

### I AM THOMAS

Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder  
 Allen & Unwin, \$29.99

THE pictures in this book pile on top of one another to become nothing less than a vision of hell. Thomas, a not-so-young boy, is leaving behind a childhood of books and toys for a monochrome world of gruesome, leering faces with sneering mouths and cold eyes. He is besieged by put-downs and instructions, and issued with directives to conform. "Do as we say, think like us, be like us," he is exhorted. The last words — "But Thomas would not" — show some hope that he will find his own place in the world, but it looks to be a desperately lonely one.

The pictures, immediately recognisable as Armin Greder's, initially dominate Libby Gleeson's text. One senses that Gleeson was as sparing as possible with her words so that the all-encompassing mood of threat and gloom emerged as visually as possible. Sparing, in good hands, also means carefully chosen, as they are here.

Gleeson and Greder have collaborated before and won the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year award for *An Ordinary Day*. It is hard to imagine children mustering the same enthusiasm, although some might show the same admiration. Certainly children on the cusp of adolescence, especially those who struggle to fit in, will be able to identify with the pressures to conform. But no one would want to live in a world like that portrayed here and there is no comforting alternative given. Individual parents will have to decide when they think their child is ready to confront the hell portrayed here.



### GRANTA 114: ALIENS

Ed., John Freeman  
 Granta \$27.99

GRANTA'S determination to get away from little-Englandism has always been one of its strengths, and even if its internationalism can sometimes seem almost self-stereotyping, that's better than the provincialism it was originally meant to counter, and aliens — border-crossers, not creatures from outer space — is an ideal if not typical Granta theme.

This issue does give us England but seen through the eyes of German-born Philip Oltermann, who describes how after they migrated he and his parents struggled to come to grips with their Englishly inefficient new house; and also through the eyes of that man who has made a career out of being alienated, Paul Theroux, who gives a whole lot of reasons why he ended up leaving England, from the Yorkshire Ripper to Jeffrey Archer.

Alienness can also be a joyous state, as shown by Ann Patchett's piece about the nun who had made sure she learnt to read and write properly at school, or indeed by Mark Gevisser's examination of being gay in South Africa through the lives of two black guys who have been on the scene since the 1950s, though there is rather less joy in Robert Macfarlane's visit to the occupied territories.

Fiction is a natural home for aliens, because so much of it is about being at odds with one's surroundings; Julie Otsuka gives an account of a boatload of Japanese village girls travelling to San Francisco to meet the new husbands they have only ever seen in photographs, and Roberto Bolano has a sketch about a drying-out junkie's afternoons at the beach.

### COLD LIGHT

Jenn Ashworth  
 Sceptre, \$32.99

LOLA (her real name is Lauren but nobody calls her that any more) tells her story in a spellbinding, deceptively simple voice. Set in an anonymous English provincial town from where nobody goes to London and where everybody seems destined to endure mean and miserable lives, *Cold Light* is a psychological thriller of the first order.

Lola slowly tells us a terrible story about her best friend Chloe and her boyfriend Carl. Lola and Chloe are 15 and Carl, it turns out, is much older. Chloe is every mother's worst nightmare — blonde, cruel and manipulative. Lola and Chloe's friendship deteriorates as Chloe spends more and more time with Carl, who is an evil little tosser redeemed, in Chloe's eyes, by the fact that he drives a car. Soon Lola's status as best friend is usurped by Emma who is also in thrall to Chloe. The narrative voice alternates between 15-year-old Lola and 25-year-old Lola, and 10 years on Chloe is dead. The town, with the encouragement of the local television station, has decided that Chloe's death all those years ago has made her a martyr to the cause of true love and Lola and Emma sit out a traumatic night together confronted by the real circumstances of Chloe's death.

This is Jenn Ashworth's second novel and she is shaping up as a confident and skilled craftswoman. Her first novel, *A Kind of Intimacy*, was also bound in the world of the protagonist's head. But while Lola's world is small — school, the shops, the neighbourhood — her mind, with its labyrinth of hidden fear and horrors, is bigger than Texas.