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# Following a tide of anger, it's steady as she goes

## WALK TO KULENTUFU

by Gail Morgan

Dent, Melbourne, \$24.95

## FORMS OF BLISS

by Catherine Hoffmann

Greenhouse, Melbourne, \$14.95  
(paperback)

reviewed by Katharine England

**T**HE second book is supposed to be the hardest to write. Gail Morgan wrote hers "on a tide of anger and as therapy for the constant rejection" of her first, *A Promise of Rain*, which was refused by more than 20 Australian and US publishers before it was selected by Virago as its first Australian work of new fiction.

Anger is possibly a better basis on which to start a second novel than critical acclaim — though that, too, came to Morgan eventually. *Walk to Kulentufu* is both more and less than *Promise of Rain* — a development sideways rather than upwards. Where *Rain* rushed suddenly into a melodramatic finale, *Walk to Kulentufu* works more steadily to a climax that is both unexpected and

inevitable; the conversational realism of much of *Rain* has given way to a heightened impressionistic rhetoric which freights the deeper issues.

The narrative structure of *Walk to Kulentufu* is similarly impressionistic. Loosely developed, it makes a spindly raft for the more important emphases of the novel, the characters and the obsessions that blind them to one another.

Australian Anne befriends a Polish migrant bewildered in Bondi. She invites him to join her on her return to Papua New Guinea where she trades in exportable artefacts and hopes to start a trout farm. Wojtek eventually follows her to a remote Sepik village where the collision of cultures and agenda becomes a tripartite one, and his inability to cope with any of them results in tragedy.

As a plot, it seems hardly to have got started before it is abruptly terminated. Arriving at the end, I felt almost that I had missed half the book, but along the way Morgan has crafted two fine and complex characters, particularly Wojtek, and explored with intelligence and insight the migrant condition.

"The important thing in life was to



Gail Morgan ... promising work.

decode its messages." It is Wojtek's inability to decode cultural messages that leads to his first disappointment, then sacrificing Anne despite his love for her — although Anne's curious contention that one form of culture shock may cure another is also to blame. Wojtek, obsessed with his Polish past, casts Anne as the mother/wife-country, is lost without the tension of Russian

opposition, and constructs his own imperialism in the most inappropriate circumstances. Playing Russia, he loses Poland, and the final concessions of a pagan culture are no consolation.

Morgan has said that she feels it is a writer's task "to show up this country ...": "I see myself as a literary guerilla who throws a few barbs, then runs for cover." Her most telling barbs in *Walk to Kulentufu*, however, are relatively gentle ones — "Here, in this upstart adolescent of a country, patriotism was as compulsory as the vote ... one needed to seize every opportunity to say what a great country it was — the way one must so often speak well of the classroom bully."

*Walk to Kulentufu* is not a major work, but it helps to consolidate Morgan's position as a promising writer who may be expected to produce a work of power and stature in the future.

*Forms of Bliss* is a second novel for Catherine Hoffmann, whose highly-acclaimed first, *Crystal*, I have not yet read. The tale of a tortured love affair between a dedicated artist and a young man for whom life and its verities are far more flexible, not to say negotiable, it is

written in a vibrant, resonant prose which seems to use all of the English language, from the most colloquial expressions to the most formal and the most obscure, all mixed together in an unusual and curiously potent medley ("As he frisked and smooched his once starved, hurt and grieving old lover ...").

Hoffmann hangs her story on the myth of Danae — the princess locked in a tower and impregnated by Zeus in a shower of gold. Zoe Danae Chapmanos, immured in the pure tower of her art, consecrated to her attempts to touch the godhead through her painting, forsakes her destiny for the embraces of Joel Manne, cartoonist, and destroys herself.

Hoffmann is, on occasion, entertainingly savage about trendy critics and art entrepreneurs — "this country's determiners of taste, its cultural tone setters, all sour withholders of enthusiasm and approval who fed their egos on the morsels of disdain ..." — and, like her heroine, is completely uncompromising in her vision of the artist, although I couldn't always go along with her vision, I was convinced by her characters and compelled by her passion, her fierce and gutsy joy.