



Author Gail Morgan ... home in Balmain after an unhappy affair with Virago.

Picture by DORIS THOMAS.

Return of the strong character

By JULIE MILLER

IF YOU'VE had a manuscript rejected by London's Virago Press recently, it's not necessarily due to your lack of penmanship or literary eloquence. According to Sydney writer Gail Morgan, the fault possibly lies with her. Morgan, who was Virago's first and, to date only contemporary Australian author, doubts Virago will ever risk working with a "colonial" again after her experience with them.

"I think I turned them off ever doing an Australian again!" she laughs. "I did all the wrong things. I lived in South London, I had a strong Australian accent and I didn't bicycle to their office from Camden Town. I found the whole scene there very off-putting. Virago has done a lot for women's writing in general, but the problem with a lot of "radical" organisations is that the individual always gets crushed. I felt I was being crushed by the ideologically sound Virago superstructure."

Gail Morgan's first novel, *Promise of Rain* was published by Virago in 1985, after failing to attract an Australian publisher. Despite the difficulty Morgan had in finding an outlet, the book was eventually published to wide acclaim. In its wake, it left Gail Morgan frustrated, bitter and disillusioned with the publishing industry — in particular, Australia's "unadventurous" literary scene.

Three years later, Gail Morgan would rather talk about life in Balmain, her soccer-playing dog and her new book, *Walk to Kulentufu*, than sour-grape about the unpleasant experiences associated with the

Has Virago sent your manuscript back in shredded form? Blame Gail Morgan.

release of her first novel. According to Morgan, the Australian publishing industry is finally coming of age.

"I would say there are more discriminating people in the scene now than there ever have been. There's a lot of GOOD fiction being published. The scene in Australia is infinitely better than in England."

Among the fiction recently published in Australia is *Walk to Kulentufu*, which is being brought out by Dent. It is Dent's first venture into fiction, and Morgan appreciates the attention associated with individuality.

"This book was lovingly produced," she says. "It's important to a writer, that everything about it shows love and care. It's like a child — you feel ashamed if your child appears in rags. That's how I felt with Virago — I didn't like the cover, I didn't like the production job. Dent has done an excellent job."

Despite the acclaim that *Promise of Rain* received, Morgan had difficulty in finding a publisher for *Walk to Kulentufu*. The novel was actually written before *Promise of Rain* was released, so it has been almost a three-year wait. Morgan cites the subject matter as one reason why publishers were hesitant to touch the book.

"*Walk to Kulentufu* deals with the emigre, the new arrival in Australia. A lot of people haven't quite accepted that it's a multicultural society and that we're committed to

that whether we like it or not."

The world-weary Wojtek, a Polish refugee, is a strong, almost epic figure — the type of character who is, according to Gail Morgan, absent from Australian fiction at the moment. What Morgan has tried to achieve in *Walk to Kulentufu* is a focus on character — on the individual, in this case, as he struggles for political perspective and love.

"Character has become a dirty

“There's a lot of Good fiction being published. The scene is infinitely better than in England.”

word in the novel recently," Morgan says. "Character has been discredited — if you have a strong character, you're almost taking a moral stance, assuming that you can create a person separate from yourself and project values into that person."

"The basis of storytelling is character — caring what happens next to the people in the novel, sympathising with them, even if they are not likeable. *Walk to Kulentufu* focuses on the spirit and where it is going. It is a passionate quest, and perhaps like science today its answers are less certain and certainly less materialistic."

Walk to Kulentufu is undoubtedly an ambitious project, covering the gamut of emotional and political boundaries. It is unusual enough for a female author to attempt to write from a male perspective — Gail Morgan has also taken on the challenge of an Australian writing from a Polish point of view.

"I find writing from a male perspective quite liberating," Morgan confesses. "The art of writing is so artificial that it's constantly reminding you of the structure. Using a male character is almost like travelling to another country — it's always exciting because it's a new experience."

"I'm also interested in cross-cultural experiences. I always feel that the male/female thing is like crossing cultures. It didn't seem any more difficult for me to write from a male perspective than a Polish one. The two merged together."

Gail Morgan is certainly qualified to write about the ethnic experience in Australia. For the past 10 years she has taught migrants English, and dealt closely with the problems faced by new arrivals in this country.

"Some of the stories in *Walk to Kulentufu* are very close to what my students have told me about. Quite a few have read *Promise of Rain* but found it quite difficult. They asked me if *Kulentufu* was as hard — I told them it wouldn't be for them."

"It's hard to tell, though — often they've had to make mental adjustments which aren't compatible to mine because I've taken this country for granted. I'll be interested to see if they relate to the book."