

# Dog-fighting words and fragrant memories

By MARY ROSE LIVERANI

**C**HAUCER, Erasmus, Pope, Swift, Heller — and now Gail Morgan, scourge from a Sydney inner-city convent school, born to drive publishers-cum-Cornflakes manufacturers out of the temple.

Who among them, gaping at the front cover of Morgan's third book, won't fall back chastened: God today, dog tomorrow, it warns them.

Morgan gets a lot off her bosom in this work:

*Many's the time I've observed Delph's late lunches. Many's the time ... I have seen this deity extract huge advances (for a best seller) only to allow the book to sell below the projected millions ...*

*So revenge must be taken on the little people, the mildly successful first novelist, serious novelist, anyone who breaks just a little above even. These are the worker bees who must subsidise an over-promoted queen.*

Fighting words. *The Day My Publisher ...* bristles with them. "Going to a publisher was like waiting to hear a will read. Benefits usually went elsewhere."

The disenchanted voice is that of Jean Hardacre, a failed everything else who supports her ageing parents by becoming a saga-producing machine for Delph, a publisher working for her "bosses, wherever they may be".

Delph, the misguided market prophet, insisting that second-rate romances are "an invaluable apprenticeship for a new writer", devises the storyline, maps out the chapters and then does massive rewrites. She sees herself as a top corporate executive who could outwrite any of her authors if she chose: "Writers like

## THE DAY MY PUBLISHER TURNED INTO A DOG

by Gail Morgan; Frances Allen,  
110pp, \$24.95

## FLAWLESS JADE

by Barbara Hanrahan; University of  
Queensland Press, 142pp, \$29.95

to think of themselves as special. Everyone can write. Some choose to write, others don't (Pace Dick Smith)."

Hardacre rejects this dogma, and she decides to pull a fast one on her publisher by writing two books under the same title, one for Delph, the other for another publisher. "That's so the over-promoted turkey would subsidise the under-promoted gem."

So it happens: Hardacre achieves critical acclaim and becomes rich enough to oversee her old enemy's transmogrification.

Rich enough, too, to warn that she may self-publish. Publishers are mere "printers brokers", she says. The author herself is attempting to demonstrate this by publishing *The Day My Publisher ...*, not as a vanity item but as a book with something to say and which should be expected to make a profit.

Morgan doesn't confine her apple-cheeked wrath to publishers. She cudgels advertising executives, lawyers, callow editors, journalists, romance writers and reviewers — "those cut-purses of the literary world ... underpaid seasonal workers (who) for the most part prey on the poor like themselves".

Like a good English honours graduate, Morgan draws — with uneven effectiveness — on most standard satirical and literary techniques: parody, irony, liter-

ary allusions, wit, aphorisms, word-play and puns galore.

Morgan is not Dorothy Parker. On a malice scale of one to 10, *The Day My Publisher ...* probably rates zero — a pity, since her heroine notes that "a certain malice was needed to ensure success".

Her broadsides are more likely to arouse smiles among writers than outrage among publishers. Maybe she should take a few invective lessons from Patrick Cook and Rosa Cappiello.

I love Barbara Hanrahan's *Flawless Jade*, although I don't expect to remember it long. The cover makes me sigh: a snapshot of a sweet young Chinese girl in 1950s blouse and cardigan looking totally unmarked by life.

Her purported memoirs have indeed been sweetened by sleep, the narrator tells us at the end — amazingly sweetened when you consider the terrible events of the period she is describing: China from 1939 to the '50s. Glaced history served chestnut-sized for Westerners.

The narrator tells her story in that artfully simple style only the very best writers aspire to. She begins:

*I was born in a war. I grew up in a war and there was war all along. When I was born it was the Japanese War. That was in China.*

A doctor who can scarcely see discovers the umbilical cord is wound around her neck:

*So he twisted me and untwisted me, and I came out, and there were seven aeroplanes bombing the hospital. That was my very dramatic birth.*

One more paragraph completes the first of an extended series of postcard-length vignettes with such diverse titles as *Siren Time*, *Father's Pretty Girls*,

*Romantic Shitting*, *Big Mouth* and *Smelly Underarms*.

These appear to be linked chronologically, keeping pace with the advance of war, and thematically through their focus on the constant search for food, work and shelter by Flawless Jade's upper-class mother and her teacher-father in circumstances that progressively worsen until the family is forced to split up — father caring for some of the children in Canton, and mother, Flawless Jade and her little brother trying to survive in Hong Kong.

There the teenager ups her age to get a job as a cinema usherette and there both she and her mother uphold that assiduously propagated myth of "poor but virtuous". Impoverished daughter rejects the attentions of a rich mummy's boy, work-weary mother blocks daughter's opportunity to become a film star/sleeparound renamed Flawless Jade.

It's a tribute to Hanrahan's art that she almost persuades you that these memoirs are real, that her narrator lives through the events she describes. But a closer look shows that *Flawless Jade* is really a Western perception of Chinese social customs, given the appearance of a narrative structure.

This is particularly noticeable in the segment called *Monkey Brain*, in which

is described a famous, but possibly apocryphal, culinary practice:

*Another time Mother said the banquet table had a hole in the middle, and they got a live monkey and poked its head up through the hole and then broke its skull and took the brain out and put it in your wine.*

I myself heard this story years ago from a wealthy Chinese who had fled the communists. Surely, I asked him, the blood and gore would have taken away the diners' appetite? My informant couldn't say — he had never actually met anyone who had participated in the hideous rite.

Given the lack of details in Hanrahan's account, she hasn't either. Much of the content of *Flawless Jade* gives a similar impression of hearsay or press reports.

*Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek was a Methodist Christian with a two-tone Cadillac who read his bible every day ... all good Chinese girls wear their brassieres and underpants to bed, as well as their pyjamas.*

What's authentic in the story is the voice of childhood, the narrator's selection of incident and reaction to it. Flawless Jade's vitality is not that of the individual, but of the archetype. Her sweetened misty past draws on wells of nostalgia sunk in lands other than China.

## FREELANCE JOURNALISM

Every Freelance Writer was once a complete beginner! The "Australian Freelance Journalism" Course Study from home. 25 weeks by correspondence leading to Diploma. Act now. Term starting soon.

For further information phone or write:

Australian College of Journalism  
Freepost 80 PO Box 80 Bondi Junction 2022  
Phone: (02) 389 6499 (From Sydney) or  
(008) 25 2775 (for the cost of a local call)