Comic plot in a classic cooking of the books

PATENT LIES
By Gail Morgan
Allen and Unwin, 256pp, $19.95

BANKRUPTS AND BANDITS
By Frederick Guilhaus
Wakefield Press, 225pp, $14.95

SING FOR ME, COUNTRYMAN
By Neil Murray
Hodder and Stoughton, 336pp, $14.95

By Dennis Davison

Artwork: Peter Will

OF Nobel Prize winner Grace Heatherton we read, "Nobody had forgotten her rudeness to the King and Queen of Sweden in the late 1960s, when the prize still mattered, shaking the regal hand and asking if she could get a cleaning job in the summer palace". Grace is actually a character in Gail Morgan's impressive novel *Patent Lies*, who bequeaths to five people different verions of her manuscript *The Lost Journal of Lieutenant Cook*.

The five are a curious group: a literary critic, a historian, a Sicilian migrant and daughter, and Maeve, a dazzling soapie star who reads *The Confessions of St Augustine*. They are searching for Cook's private journal, which will be worth millions. To protect them from Mafia extortion the five are kept in barracks, where rules declare: "The food will be basic, and there will be no tolerance of vegetarianism, or other fringe preferences." The critic falls in love with the soapie star and the migrant's wife holds a seance and contacts Cook.

The comic plot is a framework to display a range of opinions about literature, Australian history, Bond-type tycoons, TV culture and many other topics. For instance, here is Maeve berating a book reviewer: "You're alone with your loyal band of pensioned-off word suckers, and your discreet incursions into semiotics are like tomato sauce on the fish fingers. Spice up what is bland because there's an old duffer from James Cook University who likes what you're doing and thinks it's innovative."

Between chapters of exhilarating ideas and erudition are passages, supposedly from Cook's journal, which are a sheer delight. Authentic information is mingled with Cook's huge exasperation at Joseph Banks, supercilious, snobbish and frivolous, "who is right at this moment inviting young women to tug on Solander's whiskers, to take off their clothes, and tease the men". These superb sections alone make this novel an unusual pleasure.

The low schemes of high financiers provide the plot for Frederick Guilhaus's *Bankrupts and Bandits*. The fishy Fisher brothers aim to bankrupt Harry and daughter Emily, who are "honourable people". Loyal son Steven, having dumped his de facto (apparently because she couldn't drive his tractor) comes to the rescue with his brilliant auction technique. (Luckily the Fisher brothers hate each other.)

Steven rapidly starts an affair with journalist Jane at her flat (she "set the scene" with incense, baroque music and an exquisite floral arrangement). She also discovers that Fisher senior is an inside trader.

When the receiver, Delaney, is not playing at medieval jousting (businessman's relaxation) he is being seduced by Rhonda, a sexy secretary who gets pregnant because she forgets to replenish her stock of condoms. Emily's husband Philip disapproves of her starting an MA. Their children disappear politely when told, possibly because Philip arrives from work calling "Chief's home. Where are my Indians?" (Businessmen have a way with words: " 'So we sit on the eve of battle, swords in hand, ready to face the enemy', said Harry nonchalantly").

Guilhaus's novel is brisk, lucid and would make a reasonable TV drama. The honourable bankrupts triumph over the greedy bandits. We learn a little about financial fraud but it doesn't compensate for flimsy character portrayal, lack of irony or humour and the often banal style: "He stood at the designated spot and waited for his friend. The day was clear and warm. Steven wore a comfortable old brown sports coat and jeans." Not exactly what the blurb claims as "rollicking and racy".

Presumably Neil Murray's *Sing For Me, Countryman* is based on his own rock band tours of the Northern Territory. His narrator, Paul, responds to hearing a "didge" being played: "It rendered a guttural throb that churned and plunged me into some dank tropical swamp teeming with verdant life." Soon he wishes to escape "the suffocating norms of life in rural Victoria with its hodge-podge of hand-me-down, transplanted British values".

So for many years Paul leads his Aboriginal band to overnight gigs, eventually becoming famous. The band seems to spend much time getting drunk or sleeping with Aboriginal women fans. Paul casually fathers two children by different mothers but abandons them.

Although Paul constantly praises the Aborigines' "shared family life, the camaraderie of kinship and group activity", there is scant evidence of this in Murray's descriptions, except for two pages on cooking a kangaroo: "While the roo cooks for an hour or less, the guts are usually an entree ... They have a strong rubbery taste of kangaroo shit."

Most of this long book is devote diary-style accounts of touring drove Terry out to Roland's house we stayed there for a while. T Terry caught a bus back to Ali stayed on in Darwin for a couple r days, demo-ing a few songs Roland's four-track recorder. Th headed off, pausing for a swin Katherine and Mataranka and ca ing near Larrimah."

If touring with a rock band is mo onous, Murray has certainly capt it well.

Dennis Davison lectures at De University, Victoria.

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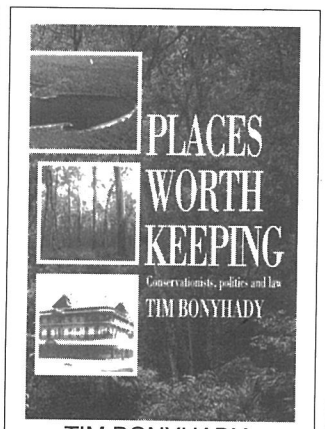

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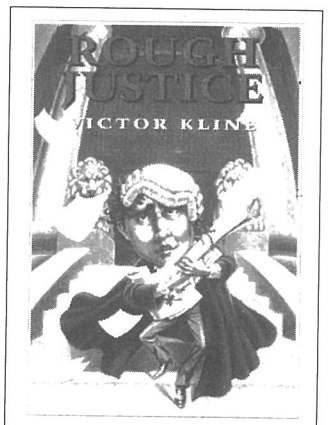

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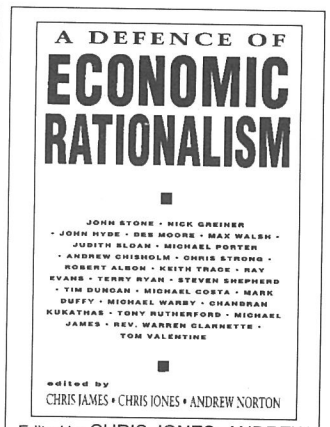

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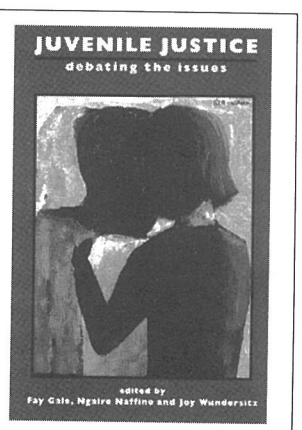

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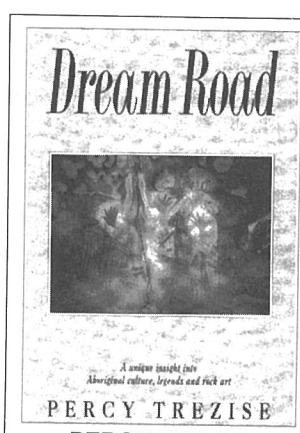

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