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# Archetypal mix cooks up into a concoction to savour

THERE is so much microwave, take-away fiction around. The plots are predictable, the words accessible and the tastings immediate. And with a lot already on my plate it isn't to say that I don't mostly "like it like that".

Yet once in a while comes a novel to savour because its culmination has been an intense simmering of fine ingredients: exacting original phrasing; keen quirky humour; lines which, while experimental, are not detrimental to understanding, and witness of a writer's profound insight into the Australian psyche. Such is Gail Morgan's *Patent Lies*.

The character of Grace Heather-ton is a Nobel prize-winning author of international stature — "the greatest writer this country has produced".

Despite her gender, it is clear that Grace Heather-ton is a simulacrum for Patrick White, or at least for the Australian literary terrain which White navigated.

Grace bequests five versions of her manuscript, *The Lost Journal of Lieutenant Cook*, to what Morgan describes as an "ante-chamber of archetypes" — a literary editor, a retired historian, a sex symbol from a weekly soap, an Italian migrant, and his daughter, an aspiring and inspired young writer. Each serves as a face for an important aspect of Australian culture.

The description of their back-grounds and how this relates to their interpretation of the journal are interleaved with excerpts from Cook's fictionalised account.

At first these extracts are hiccups

**PATENT LIES.** By Gail Morgan. Allen & Unwin. \$19.95.

Reviewer: NADINE MYATT.

distracting the reader's attention from the engrossing lives of the more contemporary players. Yet gradually the Cook Book, as it is termed, becomes the most engrossing and significant element of this novel.

Cook emerges as a poignant, intuitive character "not unlike a woman, or a writer, expected to create the world, save it, and be its source of ultimate disappointment".

In Grace's words, "He was the perfect metaphor for the colonised country."

The Australian cringe of cultural

insecurity (for those who believe it still exists) is played out in a contest between Cook and the botanist Joseph Banks.

Banks is portrayed as a man who "betrayed the future, suggested a penal colony, despised the Aborigines, and created a climate of class-based amateurism".

Cook, on the other hand, loved his great southern land and in his adoration gave it the means "if it so chose, to deliver itself from its colonial identity".

A further analogy is played out within the terms of Australian literary culture. Grace is likened to the corpse of post-war Australian literature, which struggled to emerge with native writers "abused by critics, dog-eared by readers and left to rot in Australiana sections". Then it

pushed and goaded Australian writers, as Grace said she blamed "literary prizes for the early onset of her menopause". Then it turned in on itself away from the people with post-modernism till "even the bright young semioticists were doubted, full of theory and as in touch with the world as a Rubik cube".

Morgan's own work stands alone in its originality of concept and design. She does not force or twist her material into well known Australian literary patents nor the straitjacket of modernist theory. Savour her ingredients and lick the bowl, for this is not a piece of our famous "pav" to dissolve before your eyes. *Patent Lies* has all the sustenance of mature, rich fruit cake.