

**FICTION** A veteran Australian writer tries to get up to date in his latest novel while a newer author grapples with a soap opera-like cast, writes **Peter Pierce**.

# The characters of commitment

**Shearwater**  
By Andrea Mayes  
Penguin, \$32.95

**Four-Cornered Circle**  
By Jon Cleary  
Fourth Estate, \$32.99

**S**HEARWATER, THE TALE of an unsettled town on the south coast of Victoria named for the migratory mutton bird, is Andrea Mayes' second novel. Her first, *The Rose Notes*, was published in 2005, the year in which she turned 50.

Jon Cleary's first novel, *You Can't See Round Corners*, was published 60 years ago, before Mayes was born. His latest, its title echoing his first, *Four-Cornered Circle*, appears in his 90th year. No Australian novelist's career has been sustained with such determination, so successfully and for so long.

Now Cleary and Mayes have turned, with very different effects, to the master theme of realist fiction: adultery and its consequences.

Mayes' leisurely story begins — as do a number of its subsequent chapters — with a long, lyrical passage of tribute to the shearwater, which come and go in their millions to this coast and to the Bass Strait islands each year.

Then she carefully introduces the characters. Most have been long established in the seaside township. Cassie Callinan, aged 54, has fled to a place known in her childhood after her husband reveals a non-negotiable set of circumstances: a five-year affair and a pregnant mistress.

She is numbed: "I'm in the wrong story. I've been so careful."

Gracelessly her husband has informed her that there is more to good sex "than lying there like a cabbage". In Shearwater, a new life will be forced into being for her.

Thus Cassie meets the Biddle brothers: Jack — who has lost a child



to the sea (she has lost a son to leukemia) — and his sly, sinister brother, Simon; the reclusive Elizabeth Savage, whose cottage Cassie rents; the lesbian duo Gudrun and Grace, who run the Shearwater bookshop; Hannah Okdow, who lives with Fat Harry, publican of the Sealers' Rest, and her fractious 14-year-old daughter, Lily.

This is an ensemble from such a soap opera as, well, *Seachange*.

Besides Cassie, the other fresh and disturbing element in this mix of people who know too much about one another is Kit Giller, her nephew, come out adventuring from England.

It remains for Mayes to animate this group, to inveigle them in a plot suspenseful enough to command our interest. In this she is not successful, despite the neatness and confidence of her organisation of the story.

Through a series of creepy interventions it dawns on Cassie that "someone wants her out of that cottage". Obdurately, she refuses to budge and her seething tormentor is baffled even in "those moments of supreme tension when he walks amongst them ... knows he is holy".

The villain is undermotivated and, sad to relate, far from frightening. His fate is to be dunked in the sea and then sent to Tasmania — still, it seems, the favoured place of exile.

Mayes persuades us to care about Cassie and her spasmodic recovery of will, but with the other characters we are too scantly engaged.

The elements of Cleary's *Four-Cornered Circle* are the sisters Louise Fernandez, "custodian of the Chapelli counter at Dampiers" in Sydney, and Marie Johnson, who is about to become an internationally famous author of teen fiction; Louise's amiable ex-husband, the lawyer Joe (the "rock" for each sister), and Marie's faithless spouse, Leif, who once "laid girls by the furlong" and for whom dalliance is more arduous and appealing than his work as a government adviser.

How the four resolve their discord is the business of Cleary's story. The pitfalls of fame, adultery, accidental homicide are all negotiated, so that by the end the circle has been squared and no crime or misdemeanour has been punished.

Two from the Australian heart,  
Jon Cleary and  
Andrea Mayes.

Not that Cleary is without interests in

sins of omission and commission. He belongs, after all, in a distinguished tradition of Catholic Australian novelists, to speak especially of their cultural and social backgrounds and of their recurrent moral concerns. To this tradition belong two other prolific and internationally renowned authors — Morris West and Thomas Keneally.

Matters of individual conscience are crucial in the work of all three. Cleary's novel focuses on a conflict between professional and personal responsibilities, which is pragmatically resolved. Unfortunately, the force of this material is dissipated when he goes a simile too far: "Conscience, like City Rail, is often a late arrival" and "Conscience was a weight in his crotch, like a third ball".

Cleary expands what might have been a taut and troubling novella into a novel whose pace flags and which no amount of stray plot lines can invigorate. There are deft touches from a savvy old hand, in the excerpts that Cleary gives us from Marie's novel, *Barney's Bank Job*, for instance.

He is determined to show that — in old age — he is up to date with the disillusionments and idioms of the modern world. But the prose strains: "Love eats at patience like a voracious beast". During love-making with Leif (for one sparing exertion for his wife), Marie "let fly with a bugle-call of ecstasy".

The death at the core of the novel leaves the characters, and readers, largely unaffected. And this crime pays. Having rested his detective, Scobie Malone, after 20 appearances, Cleary allows the folk in the four-cornered circle to escape detection. Scobie may be back. Cleary, too, as he continues to surmount the energy to prolong a distinguished career.

Peter Pierce is a former professor of Australian literature at James Cook University.

## Anonymous Lawyer

Jeremy Blachman  
Vintage, \$23.99



BLOGS PROVIDE A place to irrigate the bowels of one's mind: they're deeply satisfying to the blogger, oddy compelling to interested parties,

and rather unpleasant for anyone caught in the effluent. Jeremy Blachman started his blog (anonymouslawyer.blogspot.com) while a student at Harvard Law School. Written from the perspective of a fictional hiring partner at a big US law firm, it soon became a hit among disgruntled associates, who enjoyed seeing the inhuman culture of large-scale practice so mercilessly satirised in a forum that also gave them the opportunity to vent. The blog inspired Blachman's comic novel, and the TV rights for the franchise are now being hotly contested. *Anonymous Lawyer* is composed entirely of blog entries and emails — so the prose is casually clipped rather than carefully manicured. Blachman's satire is a bit loose and sometimes devolves into parody, but his swift plot and savage wit make *Anonymous Lawyer* the sort of book you can devour in one sitting.

## Lies

Enrique de Heriz  
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, \$52.95



ISABEL GARCIA Luna is dead. At least, that's what the newspapers say. In fact, Isabel is alive and well and living in a Guatemalan shack, pursuing her

studies of the anthropology of death. Her daughter, Serena, is a meteorologist who, on her mother's death, attempts to write a family history. While her father succumbs to Alzheimer's, Serena becomes preoccupied with a story told to her as a child, about how her grandfather survived a shipwreck. It has the force of legend, but what really happened? The tall tale she should be unpicking, of course, is her mother's fate — of which she remains unaware. *Lies* has a rich range of reference (it contains everything from cannibalism to the death of Chinese poet Li Po), which the author weaves effortlessly into his multivalent narrative. It takes a while to get into, but Enrique de Heriz has written a sumptuous novel that crosses continents and times — one that partakes of the processes of mythic accretion it investigates.

## Gone to Ground

John Harvey  
William Heinemann, \$32.95



JOHN HARVEY IS the 2007 winner of the Cartier Diamond Dagger — crime fiction's version of the lifetime achievement Oscar. And if his latest novel, *Gone*

*to Ground*, is any indication, Harvey deserves it. Detective Will Grayson and his partner Helen Walker are sent to investigate the murder of Stephen Bryan, a gay academic killed in his bathroom. Their first thought is that it's rough trade gone bad. But other possibilities soon emerge: there has been a series of homophobic attacks, Bryan's ex-lover looks like he has something to hide, and the victim's laptop was stolen. Bryan was writing a biography of screen legend Stella Leonard, whose death echoed her most famous film moment. Bryan's sister Lesley is convinced the murder is connected to the obscenely rich Leonard family and starts to build her own case. But the truth is more dangerous than any of them realise, and the murderer will kill again to keep it secret. *Gone to Ground* is an intricately plotted, suspenseful thriller from one of the best in the business.

# Pick of the week

## The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

Alexander McCall Smith  
Polygon, \$24.95



THE NO. 1 LADIES Detective Agency strikes again. By now, you're either a series addict, or you just can't come at it. I belong to the former category.

Precious Ramotswe — the traditionally built Botswana lady who solves her cases by gossiping over bush tea and regularly resorting to Clovis Andersen's *Principles of Private Detection* — remains a delight eight books in. *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive* involves her in dramas close to home: it sees her offside resign and her husband take on a case of his own. Meanwhile, a spate of mysterious deaths at a bush hospital seems to lead Precious to her first murder investigation. Alexander McCall Smith continues to enchant. His books are infused with gentle humour and an acute sense of place; his characters drawn with boundless affection. Precious Ramotswe will endure as one of literature's most popular detectives — not just because she's so original, but because she possesses a quality that most fictional detectives lack: wisdom.