The Age, Thursday 6th January 1994, p 1 and p3

The Equal Opportunity Board yesterday found that the Lincraft company had not unlawfully discriminated against a former employee who is HIV-positive. **PAGE 3**

'Age' short story award

A Sydney graduate student, Beth Spencer, has won the 'Age' Short Story Competition with her story 'The Mummy's Foot', which will be published on 20 January. Ms Spencer is doing an MA (writing) at the University of Technology in Sydney. **PAGE 3**

THE WORLD

British minister resigns

A member of the British Cabinet, the Environment Minister, Mr Tim Yeo, has resigned following revelations of marital infidelity. **PAGE 6**

Board rules

He praised Mr G for his courage in pursuing the case through the board.

"We get a large number of complaints about people being discriminated against because of their HIV status. It actually is quite rare for people to take those complaints forward," he said.

"Only by people taking those complaints forward ... will we be able to do something about eliminating discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS."

Mr Bartos said the discrimination case could have been avoided if Lincraft had adopted guidelines and policies on the treatment of employees with HIV.

Mr G's solicitor, Mr David Owen, said his client was considering an appeal.

Mr Owen said that he would not recommend taking an HIV-AIDS discrimination case to the Victorian Equal Opportunity Board in future because of the tough amendments to the act introduced by the Kennett Government.

Under the changes, Mr Owen said complainants to the board would be liable for all legal costs if they lost the case. Such a risk would be too great, he said.

"The amendments have made it tougher and more expensive. It is a lot better to go to the federal jurisdiction," he said.

Lincraft did not comment on the decision yesterday.

'Mummy's Foot' — a step ahead for readers

By LOUISE CARBINES, literary editor

The winner of the 1993 'Age' Short Story Competiton, Beth Spencer, 35, has worked on her story 'The Mummy's Foot', on and off for six years. While perfecting it and other stories, she worked in factories making lamingtons and icecreams, and putting price tags on Shaeffer pens.

At the moment, Ms Spencer, who lives in Glebe, is doing an MA (writing) at the University of Technology in Sydney.

" 'The Mummy's Foot' has been in many forms sitting in my file," she said. "I think it started off as a novella. I just write and rewrite. I'm a slow writer. They're like poems. Every bit counts."

"I also write poetry and essays, and I like blurring the boundaries between these forms." 'The Mummy's Foot', for instance, is part of a collection called 'Things in a Glass Box' to be published this year in the Scarp-Five Island new poets series.

Ms Spencer has won $2000 for her story, which was chosen from 642 entries. Mr Barry Homewood, who lives in Cardigan, Victoria, has won second prize of $1000 for 'Winter in Berlin'. Mr Darren Hill, from Abbotsford, won third prize of $500 for 'The Wide Circle', which is published today in The Best.

'The Age' runs the short story competition with the writers' association, P.E.N.

Of 'The Mummy's Foot', one of the judges, Mr John McLaren, the editor of 'Overland' magazine, wrote: "This story uses a remarkable objectivity in the description of time and place to tell a story about the rite of passage from a world of safety to one characterised by the strangeness of death and disappearance."

Ms Spencer toasts her win: "It's not just the money. It means that something that is ... a labor of love gets the opportunity of reaching a wide audience."

The Melbourne writer Carmel Bird, who also judged the competion, wrote: "The three prize-winning stories display an urgency, and a willingness to take risks that was generally absent from the other stories."

Ms Spencer saif: "I love the compactness and intensity of the short story form and the huge range of things that you can do with it.

"This story grew out of an experience, but what interested me was all the intersections of ideas about boundaries and the body. The difference in the way the body is regarded by hospitals, religions and fashion and the borders that seemed at the heart of the memory; city and country, Melbourne and Adelaide, childhood and adulthood, the family and the wider society, youth and the older generation, this world and the next.

"And 1969 has always seemed such a symbolic year — Australia's coming of age in some senses, and in others, merely another struggle between the old allegiance to Britain, and the new fidelty to America. The child in the story is on the border of all these things," Ms Spencer said.

"A good short story can take months to write and it's just not a form publishers in Australia are very interested in. They say stories don't sell, but I think this can be a self-fulfilling prophesy. Who can afford to concentrate on getting really good at stories if you know this is the prevailing attitude, and that you're going to have immense problems getting it published?

"Which is why it is so wonderful when something like this happens. It's not just the money. It means that something that is very much a labor of love gets the opportunity of reaching a wide audience."

'The Wide Circle' is published today in The Best. 'Winter in Berlin' will be published on 13 January, and 'The Mummy's Foot' on 20 January.

The Age Thursday 6th January 1994 p1 + p3

The Age, 1995, *Spectrum*, p 4

Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN

Literary renegade: Beth Spencer — doesn't want to assume the role of author as dictator or all-knowing sage.

Culture and anarchy

FIONA CAPP *speaks with a literary anarchist whose work defies pigeonholes by crossing genres.*

'THERE are three rules for writing a novel," Somerset Maugham once said, "Unfortunately nobody knows what they are." There may be no rules, but there are still plenty of conventions that determine what gets published. And those who defy these "Geneva conventions of the mind"; as Orwell described them, can find themselves akin to outlaws.

The judge turned puce; exploded; spluttering questions at me in an outraged voice.

"Do you know what an anarchist is?" he boomed. "An anarchist is someone who wants anarchy in SOCIETY."

(Hard to argue with.)

— from Spencer's short story 'Fatal Attraction in Newtown'

Meet Beth Spencer, literary anarchist. In a society that categorises people as "novelists" or "poets" or "playwrights" or "academics," Spencer is something of a renegade. She doesn't quite fit in.

She writes essays that have the quality of poetry, short stories that function as criticism, novels that read like a montage.

Although she won *The Age* short story competition in 1993, has had many short stories, essays and poems published and anthologised over a period of 12 years, and had a book of poems, *Things In A Glass Box*, released last year, she is lesser known than many first-time novelists because her body of work is so diffuse.

Recently, she was awarded the inaugural D. J. O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship and is in residence at the Australian Centre at Melbourne University.

Having your voice heard and creating a space for yourself isn't easy when you are flouting literary protocol. As Spencer puts it in her essay "Writing as no one from Nowhere", it can be like gate-crashing a party, announcing that you disapprove of the whole damn show and then trying to take the party back home.

It's not that she wants to stake out a new territory and claim it as her own. That's too much like colonisation, like conquering the frontier. She prefers the metaphor of bashing a hole in the fence so that anyone can get through.

He turned even redder (outraged) and said, "Get out of my sight, out of my court."

And in a voice full of loathing, "I wouldn't even inflict you on the defendant."

Something like this courtroom episode happened to Beth Spencer when she was called up on jury duty. She wrote about it in her short story *Fatal Attraction in Newtown*, which was published in *Picador New Writing 2* last year. The story is a fictional exploration of the gender politics in the movie *Fatal Attraction* but the relationship between the judge and potential juror can also be read as a commentary on Spencer's tenuous position in the literary world.

"There are very few people around who would actually have a sense of the body of my work. I'll do a reading and people will come up to me afterwards and say, 'I came along because I read something of yours six years ago'.

"I know it's registering and people are taking an interest in it but there's nothing people can do further because I don't have a major book."

LIKE any writer, she works hard at achieving a desired effect. It's not a matter of anything goes, of plucking words or moments out of a hat and throwing them into the soup.

But unlike many writers, she doesn't want to assume the role of author as dictator or all-knowing sage. Her aim is to encourage readers to be active rather than reactive, to participate rather than wait until buttons are pressed.

Publishers who have seen her collection of essays *Making Love/Making War* are impressed but tell her that essays and short stories don't sell.

Spencer now describes her longer prose manuscript *The Stories of Barbara Boulevard* as a montage novel and feels that she has finally discovered a form that works for her. She believes that many publishers underestimate the sophistication of their readers by not recognising the appeal of such hybrid forms.

"I'm at the stage with stuff out at publishers that's been there a long time and I think that means I have gone into the too-hard basket. I'm prepared to go into small press or some other kind of more radical publishing, or the Internet, if I have to. But I just want to make sure first that I have been rejected."

Recently, after seven years of unsuccessful application for Literature Board grants, she was finally awarded the category B fellowship. This recognition has boosted Spencer's confidence to keep doing what feels right. "I think there are probably a lot of people like me but they're not getting heard because there isn't a box to put them in."

Like many experimental writers, Spencer subverts the traditional desire for a linear narrative. Although books like Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* and *The Orchard*, or Beverley Farmer's *A Body Of Water* have combined essay writing, biography, and fiction, and demonstrated that there is a demand for this kind of work, Spencer has found that publishers are reluctant to take the risk with a writer who hasn't yet made her name.

"Publishers say, 'Is it like *The Orchard*?' It's much more theoretical. I can't think of anything which I can say, 'It's like X' . . .

"My stuff is really knotted together and it gets its points across metaphorically and through images and with jokes."

The standard essay, Spencer believes, is still "pretty genteel". She identifies the two most common voices adopted as the "objective" academic or reviewer, and the more chummy columnist or guest of honor at a dinner table.

Both are about asserting authority, about being a "name". If the "reasonable man" is the acceptable voice of the essay, says Spencer, "I think that I am the unreasonable woman."

Beth Spencer will be reading at The Australian Centre at 131 Barry Street, Carlton at 5.30pm on Tuesday 17 October.

Rolling Column...Beth Spencer

X-ed Again or Whatever Happened to the Seventies?

Wherever you go, there you are. Mike Brady

Blankety-Blanks, shopping centres, halter tops, no-fault divorce, *The Female Eunuch*, Gough Whitlam, platform shoes, hot-pants, tweenage bras...When was the last time you saw any of these things mentioned in Australian literature?

For a long time it seemed as if (of *course*) publishers were interested in young writers; but only if they wrote as if they were already forty — as long as their work inhabited a Baby Boomer emotional and historical landscape, or was 'timeless' (same thing?). But with the oldest of the Boomers recently turning fifty, they seem to have finally conceded that there *is* a younger generation out there. (Just one?)

In marketing language, 'Generation X' has become the 'under-thirties'. (The Generation-we-don't-know-what-to-call-it-but-hope-it-sells or the Generation-that-uses-a-lot-of-swear-words). More of an age group, really. Will next year they refer to the 'under-thirty-ones' and the year after that, to the 'under-thirty-twos?' And what about those of us who are over thirty, but aren't Boomers? Yes, we do exist. (Hi.)

When Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland first coined the term 'Generation X' four years ago, his meaning was strategic, specific, and evocative. He wasn't talking about being young in any abstract sense (even then, a good proportion of Xers had already passed the big Three-Oh), but about being young in a particular time. X is that letter on typewriters used to obliterate errors and slips, to mark the lost and forgotten. It also implies a kind of generic, no-name status. As such the term was a reaction against the Boomer ethos that everything worth doing or experiencing or saying or writing about had happened in the sixties; the view that saw the seventies as just a sad embarrassing mistake and those of us who had their formative years then as pale imitations: wanna-be-Boomers.

So how do you tell if you are Generation X? Well, it's a cap, not a straight-jacket. It's less to do with birth-certificates and more to do with a subjective convergence of a whole range of fuzzy concepts such as 'adolescence' and 'the seventies'. And as with all good labels there will always be border skirmishes.

But to me: it means being part of the first generation to grow up on television, in the days when it was too new for us to be jaded by it. It means *Adventure Island* and advertising, and a childhood dotted with lost and missing things (the Beaumonts, Vicki Barton...even a Prime Minister went out for a dip and got lost without trace).

It means being bound together by endless repeats of *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*, immersing ourselves in the lives of TV families as our own became more and more cracked and dysfunctional.

X is part of the language of the draft and the experiment: we were the ones who inhabited that brief historical moment between girdles and anorexia, the first generation of girls to boldly plan futures that didn't include marriage and babies. If Boomers grew up in the Menzies era (one single solid point of reference) we are the ones with the dual Whitlam/Fraser heritage.

If the Boomers can look back to the Moratorium marches, our moment of glory is the time we locked Fraser in the toilets at Monash University for three hours. Timor, Kerr, Pine Gap, Woodchipping: we had the demo zeal but none of the Boomers' success in backing winners.

And we were the generation educated to expect good jobs but who got there just as the door closed and the 'no vacancy' signs went up as the Boomers settled into their tenured spots for the next twenty years...Editorial positions, for instance. And while not all readers are Boomers (or wish they were), this is a prophecy that's easily fulfilled. (Very few Generation X people I know read Australian fiction...I wonder why?)

Yes, I know, I know, things are a-changing; but somehow the more they change, the more ironic it seems to get. No X marks the lucrative spot if you're over thirty (more like the sound of the buzzer on game shows when the contestant gets the wrong answer). After years of feeling my work was often considered a little too crude and uncultured (because most of my references are to popular culture), suddenly it's too tame. Not *enough* sex, not enough violence (well, none really), and characters a little too sensitive to be thought capable of surviving the modern marketplace.

(Pimples and wrinkles all at once.)

And something else. While the '70s were just as rich and evocative cultural territory as any other, maybe what is required are different maps. Maybe realism is inadequate for exploring the confused contradictory fragmented mess that it was (history speeding out of control of History). But few Australian publishers seem to have much faith in the selling power of texts that aren't organised in orderly linear narratives, and maybe this is another reason we've been so easily Xed out. As well as the fact that developing such new forms takes time.

Meanwhile, X remains a marketing nightmare (What do they *want?* ad-men say on bended knee). And sometimes we even like it that way. The power to defy definition is both a weakness and a source of strength. X is the parapraxis which slips through history and language systems, evading (and annoying) the marketeers. It hovers around the point of consciousness, tickles the fringes of the acceptable, helping define the culture by marking its borders. And like most absences, when it does speak, it can speak volumes.

Beth Spencer's first book, Things In A Glass Box, *was published as part of the SCARP/Five Islands New Poets series, and she has recently completed a book of fiction.*

Australian Book Review

Sydney Morning Herald, March 22nd 1997, Spectrum p 9

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD
SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 1997

Took the words right out of my mouth ... when Beth Spencer tried to do the right thing, she found herself living in a copyright nightmare.
Photograph by PETER STEELE

Plagiarism is back in the news, with Booker Prize-winner Graham Swift accused of mimicking William Faulkner a little too closely. But acknowledging your sources can cause another tangle of problems, as BETH SPENCER found.

cont…

STEAL *this* BOOK

MY original title for this piece was: "I'd like to have permission to be post-modern but I'm not sure who to ask." Or: "This is my story, and I'm sticking to it." Well, anyway, it's stuck to me now.

It all began when my editor wrote a note saying: "You'll have to get permission for these quotes." Although, I suppose it really began when I naively wrote my book and put in so many quotes in the first place. Or maybe it began that day, just before I was born, when my father walked into the house carrying a brand new television.

Anyway, I'm part of a certain kind of world, and I write in a certain kind of way. My recently published fiction, *How To Conceive of a Girl*, incorporates lots of little narratives – outside texts – within its wider narratives. Everything from stories and anecdotes, to bits from *The Donahue Show*, the *Bible*, books on infertility and birth, gossip items from *New Idea*, and so on.

I'm definitely a magpie, with a taste for the space junk left lying around out there. In general, I don't pick my bits out of someone else's nest, but off the street or in supermarkets, or I dig around in rubbish dumps.

I don't know how I suddenly became convinced I had to get permission for everything or I was going to be sued. I suppose I got conservative legal advice the first time around. (There are so many rumours out there; it's such a "grey" area . . .) I also knew that my own publisher had been sued last year, that it had cost probably more than I'll ever make from this book, and that with the proliferation of multimedia, everyone was clamping down on this kind of thing.

So, there I am: 10 hours a day on the phone, drafting letters and searching back through boxes of notes. Doing (what I now see as) crazy things such as trying to track down the records of the now defunct *Sunday Observer* so I can get the name of the journalist who wrote a piece on Lynda Carter back in 1980 . . . (Which some wonderful sub-editor headed "I Want a Baby! – Confessions of Wonderwoman". How can I presume to "make these things up" when they're so perfect already?)

Then I'd used 25 words from Agatha Christie . . . and 43 words from a philosophy text . . . and that story within the story that I've rewritten from memory from a 1960s *Reader's Digest Omnibus*. Just tracking down who holds the rights for a particular song can cost $50, so I join a Lou Reed mailing-list on the Internet and get inundated with e-mail from fans listing every song in the order he sang them for every concert on his tour, and learn to refer to him as "Lou" or "The Man", and eventually after a few wild goose chases I find out that *Pale Blue Eyes* is administered by EMI. (Um . . . it was EMI that sued my publisher.)

All the time I'm busily scratching around after these motes, what I'm desperately trying to ignore are a few rather large and uncomfortable logs.

The first is: I've made seven references to particular recordings of songs in my book – albeit brief, but ask any music publishing company and they will act aghast at the idea that you could use any word or phrase from a song without permission. Fees are determined by the company, but $150-$250 is pretty standard. Add that up, and seven tiny references (and oh, how merrily I knitted them in) could end up as a bill for perhaps thousands of dollars.

Then the nice young woman from *marie clare* magazine in England: once I explain (on an expensive phone call late at night) that from the article syndicated to *Cosmopolitan* four years ago I'm using only 80 words that aren't actually on the public record, she says, "Oh, in that case it will just be a token fee of £50." I see.

So (fortunately) it's about this time that I pause before I post out my two dozen letters seeking permissions. What if even a proportion of these sources want to charge "token fees"?

Then the other log that I could see (in my fitful, nightmare-filled sleep, especially if I had to set the alarm to ring Lou in New York at some ungodly hour) sweeping down the river towards me. Well, there were two of them, kind of tied together. Sitting on the first, with an expression on his face that I couldn't quite make out, was the ghost of J. M. Barrie.

In a novella which is about a third of the book, I've used the occasional brief quote from *Peter Pan* as a structuring principle – little typographical stepping stones. Except that my Peta is a girl; so even when the quotes stay the same, in the context of a story exploring being childless (by choice or otherwise) and cultural notions of femininity and adulthood, they take on very different meanings from the original.

(For instance: "'If you find yourselves mothers,' Peta said darkly, 'I hope you will like it.' The awful cynicism of this made an uncomfortable impression, and most of them began to look rather doubtful.")

The quotes are fewer than 400 words out of 20,000 and I feel that Mr Barrie himself would approve, but he's dead and it would be some unknown person who administers the estate

2/3 Spectrum, SMH, Sat 22-3-97

p9.

cont...

making the decision. What if he or she didn't happen to like what I was doing?

And on the other log: people from *Fatal Attraction*, barreling down on me for a story in which I've not just quoted dialogue from the film, but have appropriated the main characters and actors and sent them off on a mission round the back streets of Newtown.

But can I realistically ask James Dearden and Adrian Lyne for permission to critique their film in the way I have? (It's not exactly a flattering view.)

So: it was about this point that some of the people I was seeking advice from (such as the Australian Society of Authors) began to see that maybe I wasn't just a criminal-minded anarchist post-modernist who wanted to be able to rip off other people's words without paying for them. That maybe my rights as a writer also needed defending. And that this isn't just a black-and-white copyright issue, but is also about free speech.

I can't write the way I do if I have to pay everybody a tithe. (And I'm not just talking lots of little sums: Macmillan in the UK wanted $500 for every print run for a few brief quotes and paraphrases from a 1970s book about faeries; and EMI originally asked $830 for 11 words from *Pale Blue Eyes*).

And I can't keep writing this way if anyone who doesn't like what I've said or implied about their work has the right to refuse to allow me to quote from it.

The simple answer is: the clause within the Copyright Act that allows for "fair usage" of another's work "for the purposes of research, criticism or review".

But this is a book of fiction. Can I rely on getting a judge who understands that fiction can sometimes also be criticism? Besides, most of these things aren't decided by judges, because they rarely get to court.

Music publishing companies realised this a long time ago: whoever has the biggest team of lawyers and the most money in effect gets to set the laws. For a long time, their interpretation – that even using one line of a song constitutes a copyright violation – has been accepted as fact. Even though to my knowledge this has never actually been tested in the courts; and it's not the advice I received from the Australian Copyright Council.

In other words, if publishers tend to settle out of court – and who can blame them? – it becomes irrelevant whether my use is legal or not.

Let me stress that I fundamentally support the principle of copyright protection for authors: that is, the principle of asking for permission to reproduce substantial pieces of another's work, and the need to compensate artists for any loss of sales this might involve, or for their original labour in producing the work.

But I also believe that writers need to be able to engage imaginatively, creatively and productively with the cultural products and contemporary cultural events around them. I can't see that it's in anyone's interest (least of all other artists' and musicians') for us to be forced to keep writing books as if music, television, films and magazines don't exist or have important effects in the world or on people's lives and feelings.

I also don't see that, given the nature of contemporary culture, it's particularly useful (or even possible) to make a distinction between those who appropriate and those who don't. What might be more useful is to look at the effects and implications of the myriad borrowings that do go on: the ethics, if you like, or the politics.

However, sometimes I wonder if the more ethical I try to be, the more potentially actionable I might be making myself in the long run.

More than once I received the helpful advice: Don't acknowledge it. Don't identify the source. Shuffle the words around a little bit. Whatever you do, don't write and let them know! In other words: steal it.

And this is my concern – that if we have an inflexible attitude to the use of other people's words, then we encourage a climate in which people steal rather than borrow, pilfer rather than critique; or where the jokes become merely private.

There seems to be this idea out there that appropriation is easy. A bit like the old idea that free verse in poetry is easy – if you don't have to rhyme, then hey, where's the talent in that?

But if you are concerned with attribution and sourcing and referencing; with evoking the original context and maintaining the integrity of the fragment in its new context; with a whole range of ethical and political issues, as well as trying to sew the whole thing together into some kind of compelling narrative; with preserving a multiplicity of original voices, and yet still taking some kind of final authorial responsibility for what you are doing, all that is quite complex and takes a lot of thought, a lot of repetitive, painstaking labour, and imagination.

I prefer to think of myself as a collaborator or cultural partner, not a thief.

In fact, without exception, every author I've been able to contact directly has been delighted that I've used their work and has wished me every success. (This includes The Man himself, who instructed EMI to reduce the fee to $130 after I wrote him a letter raising these concerns . . . which, by the way, was the only fee I decided in the end needed paying; and this for pragmatic, not legal, reasons.)

Lifting something can be exactly that; it doesn't have to be exploitative. As Eudora Welty once put it: "Criticism can be an art, too. It can pick up a story and waltz with it."

This is an edited version of a paper delivered at the National Book Council's summit on "Authors, Authenticity and Appropriation". Beth Spencer's first book of fiction, How to Conceive of a Girl, *is published by Vintage. She is working on a novel*

Brisbane Festival Press Release, August 1997

The Steele Rudd Award Short List Announced

The field for the 1997 Steele Rudd Award, Australia's premier prize for short story writing, has been narrowed down to just three contenders. Judges Susan Johnson and Robert Drewe considered fourteen published anthologies in order to pare the possible winners down to *The Lulu Magnet* by last year's winner Matthew Condon, *Dirt* by Catherine Ford and *How to Conceive of a Girl* by Beth Spencer.

Australia's Best Short Stories

The three writers short listed represent the best in contemporary short story writing.

In short listing *The Lulu Magnet*, Robert Drewe wrote, "There is no one at the moment writing so humorously and painfully about Australia life than Matthew Condon. *The Lulu Magnet* is ... a worthy descendent – and post-modern amalgam – of Rudd and Lenny Lower and Ross Campbell and Frank Moorhouse."

Catherine Ford's *Dirt* was described by Johnson as "Beautifully controlled, carefully observed stories about submerged lives, the secret, inner-workings of women and men, written with an arresting clarity. Ford's eye is unerring."

In her summation, Johnson could only add to the critical plaudits already received by Beth Spencer's collection: "A witty and engaging debut offering an eclectic mix of sexual politics, memory, fairy-tales and popular culture, Beth Spencer's *How To Conceive of a Girl* takes the short story into new unexpected directions".

Winner Announced

The winner of the 1997 Steele Rudd Award will be announced by the Deputy Premier and Minister for the Arts, The Honourable Joan Sheldon at the festival launch at the Brisbane International Airport on Wednesday 3 September at 5.30 pm.

The Manly Daily, 4th February 1997

Manly Daily, 4/2/97

All woman

Life for the TV generation

by LIZ CUNNINGHAM

AUTHOR Beth Spencer will take many 30-something women on a journey into their past and perhaps put their present lives into some perspective with her book of short stories How To Conceive Of A Girl.

References to working at Coles for pocket money, Barbie dolls and Engelbert Humperdink are stashed into the book like lucky dips.

The result is a collage of sex and hot pants, Tupperware and boyfriends and images of mum and dad from a daughter's perspective.

References to popular culture like Nice biscuits (pronounced Niece) and the Milky Bar kid form the "landscape" from which Beth draws undercurrents of unfettered sexuality.

Her style evokes playful and stark nostaglic images for many of her generation.

Even for women not of that era, Beth delivers a satisfactory taste of original writing in her stories that have a candid quality – some of which are aimed at the jugular.

Beth Spencer's writing reveals the experiences of single adult woman "as a positive thing"

Topics covered include childlessness and children and the other side of the movie Fatal Attraction (was Alex really so bad?).

Beth illustrates the point in her short story Fatal Attraction, set in Newtown.

It is a mix of adolescent images combined with adult retrospections.

Born in Melbourne in 1958, Beth says she represents what she coins the television generation – that's the one between the baby boomers and so-called Generation X, which Beth says has now been hijacked by those in their 20s. The television generation is the one which grew up "with a television already in the house" in the 1970s, who have for years been lumped as being the same as their older baby boomer siblings.

> None of my characters met Mr Right

These were the women who grew up expecting all the promises of Germaine Greer only to discover that the bottom line in the 1990s was still marriage and children.

Now Beth says singles of her generation find that there really is no positive female model for them.

"In the stories, what I wanted to do was look at how it might be possible to explore this experience of being a single adult women in a way that refigures it as a positive thing," Beth said.

The title comes from the way Beth's stories track back and forth looking at the way femininity has been "conceived for us, the ones who inhabited that brief historical momemt between girdles and anorexia," Beth said.

She said in 19th century novels the heroines either married or died.

"In my stories, none of my characters meets Mr Right but they don't die either."

Beth Spencer will be talking at Manly library on Thursday, February 13, from 7pm, and for all those women who believe there's more to life than marriage and children, Beth is sure to raise a stimulating debate.

Beth Spencer won the Age Short Story of the Year Award in 1993.

How To Conceive Of A Girl by Beth Spencer is a Vintage Book published by Random House.

Thanks, Dinny.

Report from Beth Spencer, Inaugural D J O'Hearn Memorial Fellow (September/October 1995)

"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Virginia Woolf) - still as true as it ever was, and the D J O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship at the Australian Centre provided both for a month, and much more.

Apart from anything else - as a writer 'yet to become established' and working from home for the past thirteen years - it was wonderful to be Someone from Somewhere for a while. The combination of the names 'Dinny O'Hearn' and 'The Australian Centre' had a magical effect. I was constantly reminded of Dinny's impact on the literary scene in Melbourne by how readily people responded with enthusiasm and interest, whenever I mentioned why I was here.

Soon after I arrived, the Centre hosted a literary lunch, where I read from recent work, talked about my current projects and got to meet members of the Melbourne University English Department and editors such as Helen Daniel (*Australian Book Review*) and Louise Carbines (*The Age*), whom I've had correspondence with in the past, but have never met.

This resulted in two commissioned pieces for the *Australian Book Review* (a review in the October issue, and a column on Generation X in the forthcoming December issue); and an article in the Saturday Extra section of *The Age*, written by Fiona Capp.

Like most writers I always seem to have several projects on the go at once, although the main project I worked on while at the Centre was structuring and editing a book of previously published essays and experimental pieces called *Making Love/Making War*.

I was also kept busy finalising production of a radio essay for ABC-RN called 'Jo and Louisa and Gillian and Me' (about the book and film versions of *Little Women*); approaching publishers with a recently completed book of fiction; promoting my book of poetry, *Things in a Glass Box* (including a reading in Wagga Wagga); and making notes for my next book of fiction to be called *A Short (Personal) History of the Bra and its Contents - 1958-1996: From Maidenform to Madonna*.

As the fellowship provided access to basic resources such as phone, photocopier, laser printer, Internet, fax, room to organise and lay out work, and use of an academic library, I was able to be much more productive during this time than usual. The value of these things can easily be underestimated by those who take them for granted.

It was great to re-bond with my home town after living in Sydney for so long; and I really enjoyed the change of coming into an office each day and the regular contact with staff, writers, researchers and teachers. I was also delighted to find myself across the hall from Paul Carter - another editor (or former editor in this case of *The Age Monthly Review*), who I've had dealings with in the past, but never met.

One of the hardest things about writing is the isolation, and the fellowship helped break this for me in a number of ways: by making it easier to make contact with other writers and editors, and by giving me the opportunity to present my work directly to an audience. I particularly enjoyed taking Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poetry class when he was away, and giving two fiction readings - one in the English Department, and a public reading of *Fatal Attraction in Newtown* at the Centre (from which I received my first fan-poem: *Fatal Attraction in Carlton!*).

So the fellowship gave me time, money, an office, resources, new friends, new contacts and over-all (it was a busy two months, and during this time I also received notification that I'd been awarded a Category B Literature Board grant for next year) a clearer sense of who I am as a writer and where my priorities lie for the next few years.

I was never fortunate enough to meet Dinny O'Hearn, but from what I've heard about him, his friends have chosen the right kind of place in the Australian Centre to honour his memory: a haven for a range of people whose work mightn't quite fit anywhere else, and a place with a very real sense of warmth and nourishment and interest in all types of cultural pursuits.

My great thanks to Rhyll Nance, Luisa Abiuso, David Goodman and Ruth Fincher at the Centre for making me feel so welcome that I stayed an extra month; and to the judges, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Helen Daniel, George Papaellinas and Ruth, and everyone involved in setting up and administering such a terrific fellowship. And, most of all, to Dinny O'Hearn.

Beth Spencer
Sydney, November 1995

Rubik's Cube

June Factor, Associate at the Centre, is writing a planning brief for the Children's Museum, the 'Rubik's Cube' part of the new Museum of Victoria to be built in the Carlton Gardens. June envisages an innovative and enticing centre for children and their families, with imaginative programs reaching beyond the museum site.

She would be pleased to receive ideas for the Museum on ext. **7235** or E-mail: **june_factor.history@muwaye.unimelb.edu.au**

Visitor to the Centre

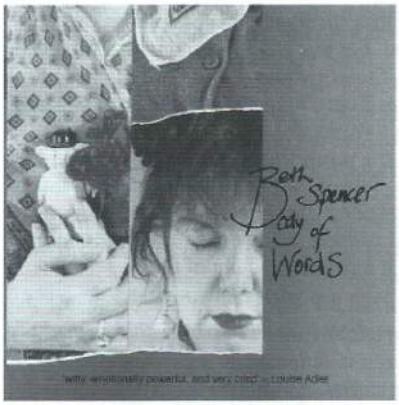
Peter Beilharz (Sociology, LaTrobe) is visiting the Centre on study leave. He is completing a book, *Imagining the Antipodes - Thinking Through the Work of Bernard Smith*, and following up research on the Woolves at Sussex and the Pember Reeves' at LSE, working as a Visiting Fellow at Chapel Hill on a comparison of American and Australian Sociology and the ANU on the politics of Vance and Nettie Palmer.

Opinion, South Australian English Teachers Association (SETA) magazine, Vol 48, No. 2, 2004, pp 19-22. Also reprinted in *Metaphor*, ETANSW magazine, Issue 4, November 2004, pp 58-60 and *Idiom*, VATE (Victorian Association of Teachers of English) newsletter, July 2004.

Adding Value to the Classroom Experience

Beth Spencer in Conversation with Warrick Wynne about her new *Body of Words* and *Box of Words* CDs

Beth Spencer is a Melbourne writer about to release a double audio CD and a CD-ROM of her writing, aimed at secondary students. Warrick Wynne is a Melbourne poet and English teacher. They spoke about her project.



Warrick Wynne: Beth, you've always been a writer who's crossed boundaries and genres in your writing. You've also never been easily categorised as one particular style or content. You've written poetry, prose, non-fiction and sometimes inter-mingled them all at once, often in confronting and powerful ways. You had a short collection of poetry *Things in A Glass Box,* which interested many people, and then your collection of short fiction in *How to Conceive of a Girl*.

And then there's been the way you've translated your work into radio, and it seems to work beautifully in that medium. So, in many ways a CD-ROM bringing together all these aspects of your work isn't that surprising. Nevertheless you're the first writer I've seen to offer a package that brings together a large body of work in text and audio format, particularly aimed at student audiences. What made you want to bring this together in this way.

Beth Spencer: In some ways it grew out of the kind of responses I've had from having some of my writing on my webpage.

Like the email from the scientist in Texas who read the poems in his lunch hour and wrote to say he was going down to his local Barnes and Noble to buy a copy… And he's not going to find it of course. It's hard enough to find a book by an Australian poet in an Australian bookshop (and even when it's first published, let alone several years later).

And then the email from some year 10 girls in Western Australia who had to write an assignment about their favourite Australian poet and chose me. I wasn't *too* flattered at first as I figured that it had more to do with being able to email me some questions, but it turned out they really did love the poems. (My favourite part of their email was the last line: 'We were surprised to find someone your age dress so funky and be tolerant'.) And a woman in Perth who had me listed on her website as one of her three favourite poets: the other two being Judith Wright and Dorothea McKeller!

But you see I think people really do love poetry when they get access to it. But through the normal route of books and bookshops, that's becoming harder and harder.

Warrick Wynne: Accessibility is an issue isn't it? It's difficult to set contemporary Australian poetry in schools often because publishers simply can't guarantee copies of the books will be available. This approach changes all that.

Beth Spencer: One of the things I wanted to be able to do was to make the work available, to

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anyone in Australia, no matter where they lived, and to keep it available. And this is a lot easier with CDs because even a small print run can be economically viable, so you can keep it in print even when sales drop off for a while, and if there's a sudden demand, I can get as many as I need printed within two weeks. Teachers don't want to spend valuable time and energy learning how to work with a text only to find out that it's out of print.

Also it's often the very forms that are most suited for teaching that are the most difficult to source. Poetry, short stories and essays are all notoriously difficult to publish in Australia, and almost impossible to keep in print. And yet it's really important that students have access to a wide variety of contemporary work in the forms they are being asked to write in.

Warrick Wynne: CD-ROMs have been around for a while now but this is quite different; you've given the reader the full text, the audio and worksheets for teachers. It's very flexible and not at all linear.

Beth Spencer: What I've aimed for is a resource that can be used in a variety of ways, a variety of situations, and that can be adapted to a range of teaching strategies. So this comes in two parts -the *Box of Words* CD-ROM, and then the *Body of Words* CD.

So one idea is that you can listen to the CD over breakfast or on the way to work, choose the piece you want to use, then pop the CD-ROM into the computer, read the background notes on that piece, print out the text, the discussion questions and writing exercise sheets to photocopy as handouts, and collect a CD player to use on your way to the class.

Warrick Wynne: It's interesting too that you've not been afraid to enhance these audio pieces with different voices, sound effects, and in some cases professional actors.

Beth Spencer: I love working with sound, and I love working with voice too. Having all this material that had already been produced to a high quality for ABC Radio over the years was the other main impetus for the project. And it seemed a really good use of the medium that audio-book publishers are just not exploring.

All they seem to be interested in doing is taking a best-selling book and making an audio version of it. But just because something was good in print doesn't necessarily make it a good audio experience. It's much the same as with films -- they are different mediums, different experiences. And because short forms rarely become best-sellers in print, then almost all audio books are novels. Yet a short piece of fiction, or poetry, or an interesting and thoughtful essay, seems to me to be much more suited to audio.

I like the idea of being able to listen to an interesting essay while doing the dishes, or a story while getting ready for bed. Or to listen to a poem just for the sheer joy of it, as a momentary relaxation in between your work. Something that you can dip in and out of, select a track, and even walk away from and miss a bit and still come back and tune in again… that to me seems a much better use of the medium.

And then there's all the possibilities of using sound. For this CD I worked with a sound engineer, Stuart Ewings, to produce a series of the poems from *Things in a Glass Box*. And he's done a wonderful job. Using sound to work *with* the poem, enhancing its meaning and effects. One of the poems in particular, a long piece called 'The Museum of Fire' now has trains rushing in and out of it to really locate the way it moves in and out of the present and the past, which is what it always needed.

Warrick Wynne: Your writing seems to move between traditional and separate forms: poetry, short stories, non-fiction etc. These labels don't seem to matter much to you. In fact there's a kind of power and significance gained through the inter-textual connections of these works brought together don't you think?

Beth Spencer: In a way it's the very thing that's worked against me over the years as a writer -- having scatter-gunned across so many genres and styles and topics rather than stuck to one form and become known for that -- that makes the CD-ROM format so ideal. I've been able to design it with lots of cross-linking's, and been able to include very disparate pieces -- or pieces that are disparate in one way, in style for instance, but actually have a lot of connections in other ways.

One example that comes to mind is the way a rather straight essay on the Grim Reaper campaign of the late 1980s here acts as a kind of subtext to a later piece of fiction, called 'Fatal Attraction in Newtown' which is about different ways that people respond to and perceive a

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threat. In fact a lot of the time all I'm doing is using different forms to explore similar issues. Tracking back and forth across a range of themes and ideas, like notions of history, representation, the way authority is constructed, and so on.

Warrick Wynne: There's a freshness and directness I see here in these pieces. Part of it comes from the way you seem to effortlessly integrate the popular culture into the fabric of these stories in ways that raise questions without ever being hectoring. Does some of this freshness also come because you've had direct control over the construction rather than put it through the editorial 'committee' approach? Is that why you've put this together yourself?

Beth Spencer: It's certainly given me a lot of freedom. But on the other hand, it's only because all of the material has already been through the publishing process in one form or other—on ABC Radio, or in books published by Random House and FIP, or in the case of the essays, they've all been published in magazines and journals—that I've been able to put it together like this. Knowing that it's already been through that quality-control gatekeeping process, and commented on by critics and reviewers and so on, and passed those 'tests'. I think it would be very difficult to publish something like this that was untried in that way.

Warrick Wynne: One of the things that strikes me about an approach that moves away from the traditional and the 'published' as if they are fixed and unchangeable cultural high-points is that your work, gathered together in this way, gives a real sense of the fluidity, the interconnectedness and the emerging process of a writer at work, as themes recur, ideas re-shape and morph into something else. I can see, for example, young writers, finding a lot to work with, and be inspired by here.

Beth Spencer: Well I hope so. The proof is in the pudding and if it gets more students writing in a greater variety of ways, and writing more thoughtfully, and with more excitement about their writing, then I'll be very happy. I think being able to write—even one reasonable story or poem—is a very empowering thing.

And I think writing should be a participatory thing. After all, not everyone who plays tennis is going to end up as a professional tennis player, and yet we recognise the benefits of doing this as an amateur activity. And I think writing -- and creative writing -- should be seen in the same way. There are lots of benefits, pleasures, and challenges involved in writing even one reasonable story or poem. And when literature is a participatory activity, it is going to be much healthier overall.

Warrick Wynne: You're not a teacher yourself, so it must have been something of a challenge to put together some of the exercises and response questions to the various pieces. How did you go about that?

Beth Spencer: I did talk with teachers, and piloted the texts and notes and got feedback and advice, but mostly I just decided to write the kinds of questions and writing exercises that I'd find interesting. Personally I always hated those comprehension questions at the end of a story of poem…

Warrick Wynne: Like 'Why did the gulls mew?'

Beth Spencer: Yes, those impossible to answer things and that in attempting to answer killed any enjoyment or emotional involvement you'd had in the first place. Or the really plain dull easy to answer ones there to show that you did really read it.

So rather than model my worksheets on what others have been doing, I just wrote the kinds of things I'd love people to think about or discuss or do after reading one of my stories or poems. And the kinds of things I'm interested in as a writer, so it's really about treating students as creative beings, as writers, rather than just seeing if they really did pay attention or really did read that homework. I mean, if they didn't read it because they enjoyed reading it or found it interesting, then I'm not sure how much they'd be learning from it, so can't see the point of those 'prove you read it' kind of questions.

I'm much more interested in having them read a story of mine so that it can trigger their own thinking rather than forcing them to try to work out what was going on in my mind when I wrote it.

Warrick Wynne: So what's next for you; you're writing a novel about the history of the bra aren't you?

Beth Spencer: Yes, *A Short (Personal) History of the Bra and its Contents*, which is also my Phd. So I'm keen to get back to it.