

Tsiolkas’s hit honoured

Christos Tsiolkas’s *The Slap* continues to garner awards. The latest is the ALS Gold Medal for 2008 awarded by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. “There is a raw energy in Tsiolkas’ prose that is an exciting and challenging force in contemporary Australian writing,” the judges noted.

Verse in the Vines

Tomorrow: Join Canberra poets John Leonard, Lesley Lebkowicz, P. S. Cottier and Paul Magee for a Sunday afternoon of poetry and wine at Verse in the Vines, Mount Majura Winery, RMB 314, Majura Road, 1.30-4pm. Entry is \$15 and includes a glass of wine, a snack and the poetry. Bookings: 6262 3070.

Taking a risk: public lecture

Tuesday: Are Australians good risk-takers? Writer Max Barry talks about risk – from politics to economics, there can be no successes without the risk of failure, he says – in the second of a series of lectures on the big issues facing contemporary Australia, at the National Library of Australia at 5.30pm. He will then discuss his ideas with ABC Radio presenter Genevieve Jacobs. Barry is the author of four books, *Syrup*, *Jennifer Government*, *Company* and *Machine Man*. He is also the creator of the online simulation game *Nation States*. The Canberra lectures are presented by Sydney PEN in collaboration with Manning Clark House. Cost: \$22 (\$12 concession), includes light refreshments. Bookings essential: 6295 1808.

Bungendore literary dinner

Thursday: A romantic impulse to buy a B&B in the picturesque Araluen Valley is the story behind Rachel Letts’ book *The Deua*. Gay Woods, from the National Library, introduces Letts at champagne drinks at A Suitable Book bookshop, Bungendore, at 6.30pm, and dinner follows at the Woodworks Cafe. Cost: \$45/BYO. RSVP by Tuesday: 6238 1648.

Winter tales

Next weekend: National Gallery archivist Jennifer Coombes talks at the National Library on Sunday, 2pm. Entry, \$15, includes afternoon tea. Bookings: 6262 1271.

The Dead Poets Dinner

Tuesday, July 28: The Dead Poets Dinner is a well-established Canberra event where poets and poetry lovers meet to present a couple of poems by their favourite dead poets to an appreciative audience (not everyone needs to read). Cost for a two-course meal is \$25. Seating is “medieval”, ie, on long tables. Bookings: The Gods, 6248 5538.

Calling young Canberra writers

The 2009 Litlinks writing competition for young Canberra writers in Year 10, 11 and 12 is now open for entries. Details are at the website www.actate.edu.au/litlinks

Diary date

❑ August 24: Bernhard Schlink, author of the bestselling novel *The Reader*, will give a lecture at City Recital Hall, Angel Place, Sydney, at 6.30pm. Booking details not yet available.

Literary Editor: Gia Metherell
Information for Litbits should arrive by noon on Wednesday to be considered for publication.
Email to gia.metherell@canberratimes.com.au

Hello Spin

(or the public being duped)

Sexing up, Over egging
Dumbing down. Spin towards success
Turning a negative story around where
Journalists get trapped in the “spin cycle”.

Smart, compelling, engaging, effective in
cutting through brand communication –
although a spin doctor ought to be sought
to properly present this information.

ME? I’m off to hang washing:
the **spin** has finished its cycle.

– Daphne Hargreaves

At war over workplace safety



Collapsed scaffolding at a building site in Melbourne in February this year.

Photo: Ken Irwin

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

FRAMEWORK OF FLESH. By Humphrey McQueen. Ginninderra Press. 337pp. \$30.

Reviewer: **STEVE GRAY**

Framework of Flesh is a history of the battle for workplace health and safety in Australia’s construction industry. It is also a disturbing read – the bland facts of history are accompanied by a cascade of bodies. Men topple off dangerous scaffolding, are buried alive in unsafe trenches, are killed by debris falling on unhelmeted heads, fall down unmarked lift shafts, are crushed and splattered and maimed.

Before long the reader comes to understand how Canberra historian Humphrey McQueen’s latest book came by its title – Australia truly is built on a framework of building labourers’ flesh.

The book’s timing is also germane, amid debate over a replacement for the Howard-era Australian Building and Construction Commissioner and whether the office will retain its extraordinary powers.

Framework of Flesh puts the construction industry workers’ continuing campaign for safety into a historical context. An unapologetic Marxist, McQueen casts this history as class struggle, with his foreword titled “A Red-armband View”.

However, *Framework of Flesh* is no mere polemic against the capitalist class. McQueen is critical of all levels of the construction industry, from the boss ignoring basic safety in the pursuit of profits to the nomadic labourer ignoring basic safety through lack of training or sheer laziness.

On the way through, professionals like architects and engineers, sub-contractors, workers, governments and their inspectors, and union bosses all receive criticism.

Construction was the first task after the landing at Sydney Cove in 1788 and it remains the backbone of the Australian economy.

Scaffolding plays an important part in the book, mainly because it is from here the bodies tumble.

They still do.

Three companies and one company director are scheduled to front Southport Industrial Magistrates Court on Queensland’s Gold Coast later in July following the deaths of construction workers Steve Sayer, 52, and Chris Gear, 36, in June 2008.

The pair plunged 26 storeys after working on a high-rise building project at Broadbeach atop swing stage scaffolding, prompting a nationwide ban on its use. The charges, laid earlier in June, allege various breaches of the Workplace Health and Safety Act and cap off a year-long investigation.

“Injuries and deaths around scaffolding have been so persistent that building workers could be



Canberra historian Humphrey McQueen.

forgiven for associating ‘scaffold’ with a place of execution,” McQueen writes. “After all, Elizabethan hangman Thomas Derrick gave his name to a crane.”

The figures on deaths and injury show the dangers building workers face. “From 1989 to 1993, 250 workers were killed on construction sites across Australia. That number was 12 per cent of all workplace fatalities, although the industry employed only 5 per cent of the labour force,” notes McQueen.

Inherent in the struggle for safe work sites is a clash of interests and tension between the builder funding the structure and the worker erecting it

Injuries are also more common in the construction industry. And that’s not to mention the long-term effects of injury and diseases like asbestosis.

Even after 130 years of struggle, in the late 1990s a worker died each week, on average, on Australian building sites.

Inherent in the struggle for safe work sites is a clash of interests and tension between the builder funding the structure and the worker erecting it. Safety is paramount to workers who want to go home at the end of the day, but safety takes time, and time comes at a cost to investors and shareholders.

McQueen lays blame across the industry, from construction company directors to labourers. The bosses want quick profit, authorities fail to enforce their own often inadequate regulations, union officials sometimes turn a blind eye and “finally, labourers had to teach each other why

fast workers die young’’, says the author.

Against this background of plummeting bodies and stop-start union campaigns seeking greater safety on work sites is a range of more insidious dangers. These are the slow and at first undetectable diseases from products used in the construction industry – the creeping and creepy diseases that may take decades to manifest themselves.

The standout case in Australia is, of course, asbestos, but many industrial chemicals poses a danger to workers. Despite evidence dating back to the 1960s, asbestos continued to be used after its dangers were known. It continues to cause hazards as it is removed from buildings. As McQueen notes, “Its perpetrators were the businesses that pervaded the building sector as thoroughly as asbestos did the lungs of its victims.”

Asbestos miners and manufacturers told lies about the dangers, builders keen on a cheap, quick sheeting material believed them, governments did nothing and Australian workers breathed the deadly dust – creating a plague yet to be fully realised in terms of deaths and permanent injury.

Once again McQueen chooses to portray the asbestos scandal as the perfidy of the capitalists rather than the responsibility of the many. At times this descends into cant. Employers can be accused of venality, contempt for other humans, cavalier attitudes to safety and putting profit before people, but are they engaged in “warfare” against their workers? Similarly, are workers at war with their bosses, or just struggling justly to attain better safety, pay, conditions and lives for their families?

This shibboleth of class warfare isn’t the only phantom inhabiting *Framework of Flesh*. The media, in McQueen’s view, remains a hydra-headed individual “admass” that beyond its capitalist-inspired task to “distract wage slaves from their workaday blues” must then dupe the working class out of all their hard-won gains. This is the rhetoric of the 1950s and ’60s.

It’s a pity, because the central story of *Framework of Flesh* is important and McQueen’s insistence that there’s a war going on means the book mightn’t receive the wider audience it deserves.

It should be required reading for the architects and engineers who could be designing safety into buildings rather than confronting safety issues only when construction begins.

It should be read by employers whose first responsibility should be safety, before profit.

It needs to be read in boardrooms so directors of large companies realise that decisions they consider minor can have a profound effect on individuals and their families.

And, of course, it should be read by the men and women on construction sites. It is their story and the story of their predecessors who built a nation, but not always safely.

AAP