The years between 1945 and 1965 saw a cultural renaissance in Australia. Modernist painting by artists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Charles Blackman was internationally acclaimed. There was an explosion of iconoclastic energy in theatre, ballet and music, encouraged by government subsidies and the formation of new bodies including the Australian Ballet and the Elizabethan Theatre Trust. The Commonwealth Literary Fund began a subsidy scheme that underwrote the publication of ‘outstanding Australian works which have a limited audience’, including poetry. As Australian literature began to be taught in schools and universities, it had more cultural clout than at any previous time. During this time the work of A.D. Hope, Judith Wright and Patrick White won international recognition. James McAuley, David Campbell, John Blight, Francis Webb and Vincent Buckley joined the ranks of established poets with Kenneth Slessor, R.D. FitzGerald and Douglas Stewart. The modernist fiction of Hal Porter, Randolph Stow and Thea Astley was set alongside that of Patrick White. It was a high point for local publishing enterprises, with Lansdowne, Rigby, Sun Books and University of Queensland Press starting up, and Penguin and Macmillan establishing Australian editorial offices. In these decades, too, Quadrant, Overland, Australian Letters, Australian Literary Studies, Westerly and Australian Book Review joined Meanjin and Southerly to establish an array of literary magazines, most of which still occupy the field today. Annual anthologies of poetry and short fiction had been initiated in the 1940s by Angus & Robertson, to be followed by the journal Australian Letters in the late 1950s with their annual Verse in Australia.

Women were not readily visible in the lively literary scene of the postwar years. Popular wisdom has it that after the war women were removed from the public sphere and imprisoned in domesticity, but this was not entirely true. Significant numbers of women were writing, and painting too, combining the artistic life with the domestic. On the whole, their achievements did not attract much notice, although they were there, creatively responding to the challenges of the postwar world. In my new book, Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making Their Mark, I attempt to put women writers back into the picture, by tracing the early careers of nine Australian women born between 1915 and 1925, who each achieved success between the mid 1940s and the 1970s. Judith Wright and Thea Astley published quickly to resounding critical acclaim, but for other poets and novelists the road to success was longer and more winding. Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett and Dorothy Auchterlonie Green all started strongly as poets in the 1940s, but over the next decade Hewett was silent and Auchterlonie published.
very little; Dobson continued to write but with a reduced output. In the 1960s Hewett resumed publishing poetry, and Dorothy Green established herself as a literary scholar as well as a poet; Gwen Harwood’s frustration with incompetent literary editors prompted her scathing pseudonymous poetry. It was not until the 1970s and after that novelists Jessica Anderson, Elizabeth Jolley and Amy Witting were published and achieved the recognition their work merited.

In fiction the situation was complicated by a growing separation between literary and popular fiction. Kylie Tennant, Ruth Park, Nancy Keesing and Nancy Cato had, from the 1940s onwards, gained popular success with novels, children’s stories and radio plays. Joan Phipson, Patricia Wrightson and others transformed Australian children’s literature. Yet their work attracted little critical attention. In the new canon of Australian fiction that was built around Patrick White’s modernist work, Thea Astley’s novels were among the few by women to be admitted and gain critical respect. By contrast, Elizabeth Jolley’s stories attracted only rejection slips for years, and she had to wait until the mid 1970s to have a book published. Amy Witting, too, despite having published several stories in magazines during the 1960s, including the prestigious *New Yorker*, did not see her name on the cover of a book until 1977. Olga Masters raised a family of seven children and worked as a journalist before gaining success as a fiction writer in her sixties, beginning with *The Home Girls* in 1982. Jessica Anderson was the first of this group to publish a novel, in 1963, when she made the transition from writing for money – pseudonymous magazine stories and radio scripts – to publishing serious fiction under her own name.

Literature was a particularly unwelcoming and uncertain profession for women in the 1950s and 1960s. To account for that uncertainty requires a complex set of interlocking explanations, in terms of the social, political and cultural climate of the times – the ideologically driven ousting of women from public life in the postwar period, the dominance of cold war cultural politics that few of these writers participated in, current literary tastes and whether the kind of writing they were attempting was understood or valued, and finally their distinctively feminine commitments to marriage and family. As writers, they entered the literary scene in a small nation during a key period of its social and cultural development, yet their fortunes varied greatly. The differences among them depend partly on the genre they chose, partly on their personal circumstances (whether they had to earn a living, for instance) and partly on their literary connections, or lack of them. All were passionately committed to the art of writing, but while some maintained intense literary friendships with their male peers, others lived in relative isolation from the literary scene.
In Australia in the 1940s, when Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson began to publish, the field of poetry was flourishing. During the war years there was a flurry of energy invested in little magazines, in annual anthologies and some more ephemeral literary publications. In 1939 the Commonwealth Literary Fund was established, and it subsidised literary publications, including poetry. Between those years and the new flowering of little magazines in the 1950s, poetry was well served by the Bulletin’s ‘Red Page’, Meanjin Papers (founded in 1940), and the English Association magazine, Southerly, founded in 1939. Poetry was regularly published in newspapers, as well.

In these multiple outlets for the publication of individual poems, critical evaluation and gatekeeping activities were exercised by specialist editors rather than by commercial publishing houses. As well, over this whole period of the 1940s and 1950s, poetry was not subjected to the appalling degree of censorship that blighted fiction, both local and imported. In such a context, it was easier for a new poet to see her work in print than for a fiction writer. This meant that the literary milieu into which young women poets entered was open to new voices, and poetry enjoyed high prestige among literary forms. By the time Gwen Harwood began sending out poems in the late 1950s, the number of Australian literary magazines available to choose from had expanded greatly. Book publication for poets, always subsidised, was encouraged: Angus & Robertson and (later) University of Queensland Press took on volumes of verse, and small independent presses maintained a steady output of verse monographs. In 1964 Jacaranda Press in Brisbane published Oodgeroo/Kath Walker’s We Are Going, the first book by an Aboriginal woman to appear in print. Virginia Woolf’s prediction that the twentieth century would see the emergence of women poets seemed to have been vindicated.

Women fiction writers, whether published and overlooked, like Anderson, or not published at all until they were middle-aged, like Witting and Jolley, were disadvantaged by comparison with their contemporaries who wrote poetry. Until the late 1970s, looking for a publisher for an Australian novel almost inevitably meant looking to London. The only significant Australian publisher of quality fiction titles during the period was Angus & Robertson. Patrick White, Kylie Tennant, George Johnston, Charmian Clift, Barbara Jefferis and Elizabeth Harrower, as well as more commercial writers such as Jon Cleary and Morris West, were published in London (and often in the United States as well). Few local publishers were willing to make an investment in new novelists during the years when hardback publication was standard and paperback reprints rare. This made the publisher’s investment in a new fiction author an expensive risk, until Australian offices of British publishers expanded and paperback originals became more common for literary fiction.

As well as limited publishing opportunities for fiction in the postwar years, there were stronger disagreements about what kinds of fiction were desirable. It is no accident that Astley, the only woman novelist to have been accorded the highest accolades for her novels...
during the 1960s, was working in the modernist style, with a definite leaning to satire, as was Patrick White. Her early work was seen as part of the new kind of Australian writing, ‘loaded with poetic imagery and symbolism’. For new writers who eschewed such experimental, ‘poetic’ fiction, it was difficult to get a serious hearing. Beatrice Davis, Astley’s editor, rejected novels by Jessica Anderson, Elizabeth Jolley, and Amy Witting.

Among proliferating literary magazines, publishing enterprises, state support for writers and the spread of Australian literature as a subject for study in schools and universities, most of the influential protagonists were men. What roles did they play, with their friendships and enmities, their political predilections, and their relations with their female contemporaries? Douglas Stewart’s editorship of the *Bulletin*’s literary ‘Red Page’ from 1940 until 1960 made him a highly influential presence, both as a reviewer and a selector of poetry and stories. Through his friendship with Beatrice Davis, his taste also informed decisions made about poetry publishing at Angus & Robertson. Although A.D. Hope considered his commitment to poetry insufficiently serious, Stewart proved to be a great encourager of new writers, and was an important mentor for the young Rosemary Dobson, Nan McDonald and Nancy Keesing; Elizabeth Riddell also regularly published poems in the *Bulletin*.

*Southerly*, based at Sydney University and published by Angus & Robertson from 1946 to 1961, was edited first by academic R.G. Howarth and then, at the suggestion of Beatrice Davis and Alec Bolton, by poet Kenneth Slessor. The two men were close friends and their successive stewardships of *Southerly* provide a vivid example of the way the literary profession in Australia in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s was ‘based on male homo-sociality – in all its richness, and with all its exclusions’. Women were not well represented in *Southerly*, although Howarth published some early poems by Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson, and Kenneth Slessor published poetry by Nancy Cato and Nan McDonald, and, in the late 1950s, Amy Witting’s first stories.

Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*, was more of a loner, who started out in Brisbane without close links to either the Sydney literary world or the academy. *Meanjin* rapidly became a force to be reckoned with, and most ambitious new writers submitted work to him. He formed strong but stormy relationships with several of the women writers in *Nine Lives*, including Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood. He published the teenage Dorothy Hewett, but not her later work, although they carried on a friendly correspondence. He was a lifelong friend to Dorothy Green, but both she and Judith Wright found it hard to forgive him for what they perceived as his cavalier treatment of their husbands’ work.

Among the new journals starting up in the 1950s, *Australian Letters*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris, included women among their published writers and featured both Dobson and Wright in their ‘poets and painters’ series. Dutton and Harris were also influential publishers, establishing Sun Books and *Australian Book Review*; Dutton edited important early critical works on Australian writers. Stephen Murray-Smith, editor of *Overland*, became a mentor for Dorothy Hewett, though he was critical of her poetry and preferred her less adventurous short stories. Alec Hope and James McAuley (founding editor of *Quadrant*) were highly influential poet-professors throughout the 1960s. They were important mentors for Gwen Harwood, admired Wright’s and Dobson’s work from a distance, and both had stormy friendships with Dorothy Green.

The only woman who wielded comparable literary influence during this period was Beatrice Davis at Angus & Robertson. She was
determined that the company should be the ‘literary hub of Australia’ and, with Douglas Stewart, initiated the annual anthologies *Australian Poetry* and *Coast to Coast*, which featured short stories. Kylie Tennant, as a reviewer and, later, member of the Literature Board, supported many new writers, as did Nancy Keesing. Thelma Forshaw, by contrast, could be devastating in her reviews. Rival critics Dorothy Green and Leonie Kramer both devoted scholarly energies to the work of Henry Handel Richardson, but neither saw it as her responsibility to support women writers in particular. Katharine Susannah Prichard and Miles Franklin before them. Yet they shared a different and more urgent sense of connectedness to the wider world, in their acute awareness of the legacy of past wars. As well, they shared a commitment to making a life and a career in Australia: cultural life was to be established here, not sought elsewhere – and this was as true for immigrant Elizabeth Jolley as for fifth-generation settler Australian Judith Wright.

All these women writers came from middle- or upper-class families and, unlike most of their predecessors, nearly all had some form of post-secondary education. While they all undertook income-earning work at some time during their lives, only Astley, Witting and Green pursued careers in teaching (both secondary and tertiary) from youth until retirement age. These three came from more modest families and had completed degrees and teaching qualifications, with the intention of earning their own livings. None of the others seems to have been driven by the desire for a professional career: education at private girls’ schools in the 1930s was ‘academic’ in the subjects taught, but failure rates were high: girls were not generally expected to be keen on matriculating and going to university. Professions considered appropriate for women were few – nursing, teaching and librarianship – and career opportunities within these professions were severely limited (especially after marriage). For girls with a literary bent, the available jobs in publishing or journalism required no further education at all. Dorothy Green’s venture into the literary academy shows how slowly the major social institutions moved towards accepting women as equals. While her contemporaries, Thea Astley, Dorothy Hewett and Elizabeth Jolley, all taught at universities for significant periods of their lives, none of them saw teaching as her primary vocation, as Green did.

Like the great majority of women in the larger cohort, all these nine writers married...
and had children – demographically speaking, they participated in the great postwar marriage and baby boom. These personal circumstances affected their literary productivity, and had a marked impact on their professional lives that was not replicated in those of their male peers. To mention a few of the best-known of these men: Patrick White inherited a sufficiently large income to be able to live independently during the early part of his career; Alec Hope and James McAuley were both appointed to chairs of English, even though neither of them held postgraduate qualifications higher than a Master of Arts degree. All three had domestic partners who devoted themselves exclusively to providing the writers with a secure home and social life. None had major child-raising responsibilities. Such considerations do not usually enter into accounts of the careers of male writers, but they are crucial in the lives of their female counterparts.

All the women in *Nine Lives* had major domestic responsibilities – homes that they managed single-handedly, and children whose needs frequently competed with their creative desires. Wright, Green and Hewett were effectively the principal breadwinners in their families, yet they also looked after the daily round of home, children and social life. All did their own typing and correspondence (a role often taken on by male writers’ wives). Judith Wright expressed the dilemma this way:

> I’ve always had to do a lot of hack work: writing school plays for the ABC, and doing children’s books, generally doing the housewife jobs in literature, you might say. I don’t think anyone in Australia, unless they’ve got an academic job, can support themselves with this kind of really serious writing which you can in Europe, for instance. And certainly no woman could. It would be very difficult. Trivialisation of life is a real problem for women, dealing so much with what’s regarded as trivial, and trying to find your own value system and live by the values of a serious writer is very difficult when you haven’t got what you might call a support base.¹⁵

Writing as a profession for women in this period was something of an oxymoron: the predominant images of women in postwar modernity, as domestic or erotic goddesses, did not encompass the role of artist or intellectual. Those who ventured into such roles had few illusions about where they stood as women. As Thea Astley wrote: ‘I grew up believing that women weren’t really people, and didn’t matter in the scheme of things. … Men didn’t listen to women when they expressed an opinion.’¹⁶

Women writers on the whole were also poorly represented in the literatures of Europe and North America in the postwar decades, despite the prominence of a few female intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir in France and Iris Murdoch in Britain. Indeed, Sylvia Plath’s brief and tragic life has become an icon of the constraints within which creative women lived. Women artists across the Western world shared to some extent a contradictory position. On the one hand, they were women caught up in the massive changes that took place in everyday life, brought about by the spread of postwar consumerism and media culture. On the other, they were intellectuals who shared with others concerns about communism versus capitalism,
nationalism versus internationalism, artistic modernism versus realism and the political responsibilities of artists in a post-holocaust and post-Hiroshima world.

In Australia specific versions of those cultural conflicts between the political Left and Right and the aesthetics of modernism and realism were exacerbated by strict literary censorship and acrimonious disputes. Two major controversies in cultural politics in the 1940s set the tone for the following decades. In 1943 there was uproar over William Dobell’s Archibald Prize-winning portrait of Joshua Smith. In the following year the Ern Malley hoax resulted in Max Harris as editor of *Angry Penguins* being prosecuted for publishing obscene material. Both incidents involved violent reactions against modernist experimentation, which forced both writers and artists into taking strong positions for and against.\(^\text{17}\)

Conflicts over modernism affected fiction writers even more than poets, as can be seen in negative responses to White’s early fiction.\(^\text{18}\) This was a daunting context for new writers like Astley. Censorship of sexual material, which had a long history in Australia, added to the problems for novelists: in the late 1940s Christina Stead’s American novel *Letty Fox: Her Luck* was banned on the grounds of obscenity.\(^\text{19}\) Such censorship influenced Jessica Anderson to seek a publisher in Britain rather than closer to home, a choice that delayed her recognition in Australia.

The cold war political polarisation of the period profoundly affected the literary scene. Little magazines were generally sympathetic to the Left, except for *Quadrant*, which was specifically established as an anti-communist enterprise. Government subsidies to *Meanjin* and *Overland* were reduced or refused on several occasions, and grants to individual writers were also affected.\(^\text{20}\) There was some overlap between political alignments and the controversies over modernism: as a communist Dorothy Hewett felt she had to deny her admiration for Ezra Pound and Edith Sitwell, denouncing their influence on the ‘Angry Penguins’\(^\text{21}\) – but at the same time cutting herself off from sources of poetic inspiration.

Most of the women were wary of being drawn into such side taking. Rosemary Dobson declined James McAuley’s urgent invitation to join *Quadrant*’s editorial board, for ‘one must write as an individual’.\(^\text{22}\) The young Judith Wright was suspicious of all groups and coteries, as she wrote in 1952 to Barbara Blackman: ‘What’s lacking is the creative stillness; refusal to impose oneself on events, refusal to be imposed upon’.\(^\text{23}\)

When their children were young, these women had insufficient time for politics, barely enough for writing. Later they became involved in such causes as Aboriginal rights, refugees, conservation and peace, without aligning themselves to political parties. Their critical responses to postwar gender, race and class relations, deeply influenced by their wartime experiences, were marked by a certain detachment from ‘national’ questions and political independence from traditional Left-Right oppositions.

As the 1960s moved into the 1970s, women writers shared the benefits of increased support for literary enterprises, not only government subsidies for publications and writers’ fellowships through the Literature Board of the Australia Council (formed in 1975) but also the spread of literary prizes, writers’ festivals and the like. There were expanding opportunities to write for radio and television. Changes in the publishing industry, which made it more possible for local publishers to risk taking on
new writers, especially authors of innovative fiction, contributed to an increase in the writing and publication of books by women. During the 1980s when an expansive literary scene met an expanding audience for women’s writing, inspired by the second wave of feminism, women writers came into their own. But the story told in Nine Lives is the prelude to this decade of the women.

Susan Sheridan FAHA is Adjunct Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Flinders University. She has published widely on women’s writing, feminist cultural studies and Australian cultural history. Her latest book is Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2011).

20. Kylie Tennant experienced this kind of political wrangling when in 1952 she was attacked in Parliament as a ‘Communist’ recipient of Commonwealth funding, and again ten years later when, as a member of the Commonwealth Literary Fund’s Board, she was lobbied by her friends, editors Clem Christesen and Stephen Murray-Smith, to support their applications: Jane Grant, Kylie Tennant: A Life (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006), pp. 74-6 and 95-8.
22. RD to JMcA (draft) 23 February 1956. Rosemary Dobson Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4955, Folder 16.