The Tasman Sea – common ground that keeps us apart.

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For a list of the kind of Australians New Zealanders know about, the title story of Lloyd Jones's 1991 collection *Swimming to Australia and Other Stories* is a useful source. Warren, in a bid to gee up enthusiasm for a proposed migration to Queensland, tells his de facto partner, "'That's another thing, Marilyn. We would have new heroes. More of them.' And he began to reel off the names of famous cricketers, tennis and league players." (36) Whatever such heroes Warren may have identified, they are unlikely to have included the Australian novelist and short story writer Robert Drewe, in Wellington recently for that city's biennial Writers and Readers Week.

Warren's ignorance, however, is not indicative of a parallel ignorance on the part of his creator. Lloyd Jones, who like Warren knows about sport, also knows about Robert Drewe. In fact, in the December 1985 - January 1986 edition of the short-lived *Wellington City Magazine*, Jones reviewed Drewe's own collection of short stories, *The Bodysurfers* (1983). Jones's ninety-nine words fail to exhaust the potential for comment on Drewe's bestseller – published by two different companies, and the subject of seven reprints – but they do nonetheless focus attention on the stories' most striking motif: "*Bodysurfers* is ... an exploration of the beach and its curious sub-culture". The stories in *The Bodysurfers* are uniformly set at the beach.

Jones's comments on Drewe's work are of particular interest when considered in the light of *Swimming to Australia*. Like *The Bodysurfers*, *Swimming to Australia* repeatedly locates stories at the sea coast. What is more, the symbolic significance of the beach in Jones's stories is strikingly similar to that in Drewe's collection. I should make it clear from the outset that I do not intend to mount an argument for plagiarism here. Far from it. No one writer, least of all in Australia or New Zealand, could presume to hold the rights to the use of sea, beach and coast as motifs. Furthermore, the recurrence of marine motifs is just one among several ploys for suggesting liminality in *Swimming to Australia*. Given the similarities between the two writers' stories, however, and Jones's obvious familiarity with Drewe's writing, it may be that Jones has been influenced by Drewe; it is impossible to tell. This article will point out likenesses between the two collections, before suggesting a less polemic explanation for them.

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Close reading of the short stories published by the two writers confirms the beach as a major symbol in their fiction. While *Swimming to Australia* is less apparently deliberate than *The Bodysurfers* in locating stories at the coast, the depiction of beach scenes in story after story soon suggests a preoccupation; the sea appears in well over half of the twelve stories which comprise Jones's collection. Furthermore, a reading of Jones's stories alongside those of Drewe throws up a great many similarities in the way the two writers see the beach, and the meaning with which they invest it. Of most significance, each writer associates the beach with escape. In Drewe's 'Looking for Malibu', Peter Boyle expounds his theory on the beach:

> 'You know something? When Australians run away they always run to the coast. They can't help it. An American vanishes, he could be living in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, the mountains, the desert, anywhere. Not an Australian – he goes up the coast or down the coast and thinks he's vanished without a trace' (55).

The beach is likewise linked with escape in *Swimming to Australia*. The prison escaper George Wilder spends his days fishing on the French Riviera in 'Me, Clark and Wilder' (82). In 'Who's That Dancing With My Mother?', an anonymous prison escaper, who has made his way from the bush to the seaside township of Napier, heads "for the esplanade" when evading capture towards the end of the story (22). In a 1992 feature article on Jones, Iona McNaughton recorded that "[a] novel on escape and escapism didn't work out but it formed the basis of the stories in *Swimming to Australia*." Jones's coastal stories are frequently about escape.

Closely related to the two collections' association of the beach with escape is the frequency with which seascapes call other places to mind. In Drewe's 'Shark Logic', for instance, the protagonist, who has fled his family, has wound up on Australia's Pacific coast where he dreams of escape to New Zealand: "I was thinking about New Zealand when I left the shop this afternoon and set off for my usual walk along the beach" (32). There is an uncannily reciprocal moment in *Swimming to Australia*. 'Swimming to Australia' portrays a family looking back across the Tasman towards the narrator of 'Shark Logic': "Warren spoke up and said, 'Australia is out there.' He pointed with his hand and we tried to make out the exact place on the white horizon" (33). Each writer focuses attention on characters who, unhappy in their environment, find at the coast the promise of escape through its evocation of other places.

Nor are these isolated incidents. Drewe's collection opens with 'The Manageress and the Mirage', set on the West Australian coast, from where

"the Indian Ocean stretched flat and slick to Mauritius and beyond before curving into the sky" (13). Despite the fact that Mauritius is thousands of miles across the ocean, for Drewe, the beaches of Western Australia suggest it. A similar passage features in Jones's 'Lost Cities', set on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island: "She sees Richard kneeling down to whisper in a small boy's ear. 'On a clear day,' he is saying, 'one can see South America and the peaks of the Andes.'" (138-139) In both *The Bodysurfers* and *Swimming to Australia*, mention of far-off islands and continents hints at Australia's and New Zealand's geographical isolation, and the intensity with which escape is longed for.

The beach as escape is not only signalled by its relative proximity to other places, however. Drewe and Jones each mark the beach as the place at which illicit sexual activity occurs, and in so doing contribute to a convention that has its origins at least two hundred years before them in the writing spawned by European exploration of the Pacific. Rod Edmond has observed that "[f]or all crew in the Pacific ... the beach must have represented freedom" (67) and that "[t]he beach [at Tahiti] was understood as a border for sexual exchange across which European sailors sought Polynesian women" (69). Commentators on Australian and New Zealand writing of the twentieth century also see the beach as the site of carnal pleasure. Poet Andrew Taylor recently declared that "[t]he Australian beach has long been associated with hedonism" (285). More pointedly, Patrick Evans has described a scene from Ian Cross's *The Backward Sex* (1960) in the following terms: "He takes a trip with the woman to the beach, and because it *is* a beach and lies beyond the pales and lupins of the small town, the same things happen there as on the sands of *The God Boy* – swimming costumes sag, white flesh glistens, and a little later the two are lovers" (32).

Drewe in particular exploits the sexual aspect of beach culture. Nude bathers crowd his beaches. 'The Manageress and the Mirage' finishes with a widower's encounter with a new lover. 'The Silver Medallist' closes with the revelation of the incestuous character of the relationship between a lifesaver and his daughter. 'The View from the Sandhills' is the account of a pervert and ex-prisoner who spies on nude bathers. In Jones's 'Who's That Dancing With My Mother?', the mother of the title copulates with a prison escaper at a beachside skating rink. The woman's husband, leaving the house to see a lover, claims to be heading "'Up the coast'" (17). 'Knotts' Overstay', not collected in *Swimming to Australia* but published in *Metro* in April 1984, begins: "There is a winsome blonde, fifteen years old who, at a welcoming sign, might pop into the back of Knotts' ute and faster than a wink remove her clothes. But Knotts is not interested. He crawls past that part of the beach ..." (109).

Closely related to the preoccupation with what is often very casual sexual activity is a steady stream of foundering marriages. The one married couple to survive an entire story together in Drewe's collection – Angela and David in 'Looking for Malibu' – is by no means a happy one. Early in the story we read that "[t]wo years before, under the swamp-gum in their Mosman garden, away from the children's ears, they had talked of separating" (51). A few pages further on, they set off on a trip down California's Pacific coast that "was not without its tensions" (59). By the time David and Angela reappear in 'The Bodysurfers', four stories further on in the collection, they have separated, with David now introducing his children to Lydia. 'Stingray' closes the collection, with David this time entertaining hopes about Victoria, and too embarrassed to ring Angela in his hour of need for fear that she will confide in her "new friend Gordon" (161).

Jones is similarly preoccupied with family breakdown, and equally adept at capturing in print the strained half-utterances exchanged between husband and wife, as in 'The Waiting Room', which traces a couple's hike down the east coast of the South Island:

> Kath gave me a chocolate. 'You know,' she said. 'My feet are blistered. My hair roots are annoying the hell out of me. There's chafing on my inner thigh. Ray, I'm so happy.'
> She took my hand and gave it a squeeze.
> 'Ray,' she said, further on. 'What's on your mind?'
> She looked at me, and tugged on my hand.
> 'Ray?'
> 'I just hope you're not pegging too much on tonight, okay Kath?'
> 'I'm not. Ray, I wasn't even thinking ...'
> 'All right. All right. My mistake. Let's try a song. Come on. "These boots are made for walking ...".'
> 'No,' she said. 'I'm too bloody cold and hungry to sing.'
> 'Steak,' she said a few minutes later. And finally, 'Damn you, Ray.' (149)

Against this backdrop of marital discord, the sex at the beach promises freedom from the constraints and disappointments of the domestic life without ever quite delivering it. David and Lydia enjoy "a most satisfying quickie in the sand" in 'The Bodysurfers' (121). Yet three stories later, 'Stingray' introduces David not only as "still bruised from his marriage dissolution", but also "abraded from the ending of a love affair" (158). The adulterous mother of Jones's 'Who's That Dancing With My Mother?' returns home from the beachside skating rink not to relish her recent sexual exploit, but to repair a torn photograph of her unfaithful husband. The beach, redolent of escape, is no mere playground, but essentially ambiguous in its significance.

Accordingly, Andrew Taylor makes the following comments on *Land's Edge*, a book combining text by Tim Winton with photographs of the West Australian coastline:

> *Land's Edge*, both text and photographs, is a celebration of ambiguity, of doubleness. As its name indicates, its focus is on the edge: it celebrates that point, that interface, at which something both comes into existence and simultaneously ceases to exist. It should come as no surprise that in Australia January is the month for beach holidays: the month of Janus, that two-faced god. The beach is a hedonist's paradise: it offers us liberation, pleasure, sensuality, sexuality, even mystery and awe. But all Australians are also aware of sharks, of stinging jellyfish, treacherous waves and deadly undertows. They are even becoming aware of melanoma. (287)

Taylor's comments lay the foundation for an understanding of what makes the beach such an irresistible symbol to both Drewe and Jones. It is precisely this 'two-faced' quality that lends itself so aptly to what the two writers attempt in their writing. Both writers turned to fiction after setting out as journalists. Bruce Bennett has claimed that Drewe's

> frustration with journalism's limitations upon his style, and the amplitude of what he had to say, were the reasons he chose another, fuller form of expression .... [H]e was having trouble in keeping the fiction out of his journalism – to the extent of occasionally including totally made-up stories into his "Perspective" column in the *Australian* newspaper and the "So it Goes" column in the *Bulletin*. (7)

Famously, Jones had trouble keeping fiction out of his 'travelogue', *Biografi: An Albanian Quest* (1993); his introduction of an entirely fictional character as a plot device proved controversial. Four years earlier, Jones published a travel piece in *Listener*, 'Riding the Dog', in which his account of a Greyhound bus trip around the United States is held together by the narrator's search for "a young black guy with a growing reputation for stealing buses" (36). "The 'bus thief' gives shape to my itinerary" (36), the writer/narrator declares. Given Jones's use of Petar Shapallo to shape *Biografi*, it is conceivable that the bus thief shapes more than the itinerary in 'Riding the Dog'. It is also conceivable that the beach as symbol might appeal to writers who find themselves located on the thin strip between fact and fiction. Unwilling to be confined either by the rules of 'journalism' or by those of 'literature', Drewe and Jones find release in the in-between zone symbolised by the beach.

Such a notion is supported by the biographical notes given in publications by the two. Drewe is introduced inside the 1997 reprint of *The Bodysurfers* in the following terms: “Robert Drewe was born in Melbourne, grew up on the Indian Ocean coast of Western Australia, and has lived on the Pacific coasts of New South Wales and California.” Lloyd Jones is described on the front page of his 1988 novel *Splinter* as living “in the seaside township of Eastbourne.” Further, the biography in *Biografi* informs us that Jones “lives in York Bay, overlooking Wellington harbour”. Not only do the two writers locate their stories and characters at the coast, but they also locate themselves there, at what Jim Crace described in a review of *The Bodysurfers* as “the narrow strip of coral, sand and weatherboard caught between the desert and the deep blue sea.” Their penchant for mixing fact with fiction sees them become coast-dwelling characters in their own collections; Drewe and Jones also have trouble keeping the fact out of their fiction.

We can only speculate about the degree to which Jones had *The Bodysurfers* in mind when writing the stories collected in *Swimming to Australia and Other Stories*. What is clear is that Jones, like Drewe, sees in the beach a powerful symbol for life ‘Down Under’ and its attendant impulses towards isolation and escape. The similar geographical locations of the two writers and their similar working backgrounds offer reasons as to why the beach, sea and coastline are for each of them such favoured symbols. If Jones has drawn from Drewe, it is as one who enters a trans-Tasman dialogue, and the title of his collection is as much of an acknowledgement as he need give.

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