

### Introduction

For most non-Australians, Australia conjures up notions of an expansive, red, and sparsely populated continent. The truth is that the littoral from Brisbane to Adelaide, which is where the vast majority of the country's population live, is one of the most densely populated stretches of real estate in the world.

This is the suburbia — British in its manners, but heavily inflected by American consumer habits — inhabited by most of the characters in Peter Goldsworthy's stories. Although he knows the bush intimately (he grew up in various country towns and went to school in Darwin), Goldsworthy's favoured turf seems to be that of the urban professional, and the social cramp and personal embarrassment that accompany the relentless drive to keep up with the Joneses (and perhaps go one better than them). It is not entirely coincidental that the first flush of Goldsworthy's career as a writer is itself contemporaneous with the arrival of self-consciousness in Australia during the Whitlam years.

Many of the stories published in *The List of All Answers*, which brings together nearly all of the short fiction Goldsworthy has written since the late 1970s, are stylistically spare and very sharp observations about people faking it. Hypocrisy is a precious resource in a culture, but the price to be paid for its help in getting us to steer clear of honest but potentially harmful head-on collisions with others is the recognition of a split between our 'true' selves and the social roles we have elected to play. Anxieties about failing or being exposed as a fake are never far behind.

Often a single conceit serves as the starting point for a merciless dissection of small-stakes encounters and presumptions. In his amusing sketch *La Haute Cuisine Australienne*, a country girl trying to make her name serving up authentic Australian food in one of the big cities is forced to convert her restaurant to a tea shop (although stir-fried witchetty grubs are apparently all the rage now in Sydney's top eating houses). Goldsworthy frequently slips into a strain of absurdist humour, which ranges from sarcasm and satire to the whimsicality of what has been called 'the irresponsible self'. In one story a man's last words are imagined to be 'somebody call the vet'. *Three New Definitions of Neighbourly* dresses itself up as a hilarious spoof letter to the famous CT Onions, late editor of the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, from the Adelaide equivalent of 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'.

There are hypocrites who know they are deceivers, and hypocrites who think themselves paragons of the virtues: sometimes they don't even think they're faking it at all. In Goldsworthy's stories these characters — who have the spotless consciences of the uniquely disinterested and altruistic — are as often as not doctors. The surgeon in *The Death of Daffy Duck* refuses ever again to speak to the lawyer friend who saves his life (but dents his gung-ho image) when he chokes on a morsel of food inhaled as he does his funny accent — 'a voice that let slip things that were too embarrassing or too serious to speak of in normal conversation; a voice that could say things from behind a duck-mask, with a fool's frankness'. The newly divorced doctor in *Innocence* is brought to tears (of frustration presumably) by an old-fashioned hand-holding couple who, despite his best efforts, refuse to embrace the tenets of universal cynicism. It is a tough job living permanently in the ironic mode.

The drunk epidemiologist in *The Duty to Die Cheaply*, one of Goldsworthy's most mordant stories, is also a trapped man, not just physically in a plane but in his social role. Although the experience of being called to assist a person in distress on an aircraft will be one familiar to many readers of this article, few of them, I suspect, will ever have reacted quite like Dr Philip Shaw — although they may well have wished, like him, for 'a better Samaritan' to reach for the call button. Peeved at having had to vacate his seat in business class to babysit a dead passenger, Dr Shaw decides to be a doctor behaving badly. Sitting next to his patient, he regresses, with the help of a few complimentary whiskies, to maudlin memories of what he recalls as his better, younger self. He is the only passenger who finds his performance comic.

Iain Bamforth



**Peter Goldsworthy** was born in 1951 and completed his schooling in Darwin in the Northern Territory. Since graduating in medicine from the University of Adelaide in 1974 he has divided his working time between general practice and writing. His novels have sold more than 300 000 copies in Australia alone, and have been translated into many European and Asian languages: they include *Maestro*, published by Bloomsbury in 1991, *Honk If You Are Jesus* (1992), and *Keep It Simple Stupid* (1996). *The List of All Answers: Collected Stories* and his most recent novel, *Three Dog Night*, which won the 2004 FAW Christina Stead Award, are both published by Viking Australia, an imprint of Penguin Books — [www.penguin.com.au](http://www.penguin.com.au)

His selected poems *This Goes With That* is published by Leviathan in London. A book-length study of his work, *The Ironic Eye*, by Andrew Riemer, was published in 1994. He is currently a member of the Australia Council and Chair of its Literature Board.