

# Respectable, but they fail to shine



encounters the miseries and brutalities of modern life in his travels around the country: the derelicts of Sydney and Melbourne, the tensions between the police and the Aboriginal population of country towns, the abo-hating poofterbashers of the Centre and so on. As his pilgrimage — 1 am using Pascoe's word — continues, so he is drawn towards the Aborigines he meets until, finally, he acknowledges his own Aboriginality. At the end, having jumped bail, he discards the last vestiges of white society as he merges into the featureless landscape of Lake Mungo. A noble intention, then. But it is, or should be, repugnant to anyone who cares for books to judge a work solely on its intentions, no matter how much the author seems to be on the side of the angels - or, if it comes to that, of the devil's party. Pascoe's theme requires passion, a burning intensity of language; it demands that we enter into the very core of a character's soul and being. Nothing less should suffice.

What we get instead is a worthy, somewhat pedestrian novel. As I have said, Pascoe's heart is in the right place. But Fox's flight and what he encounters on the way — like the death of a young Aboriginal in jail — are presented schematically, illustratively.

The trouble with Fox is, I suspect, that it is deliberately timely and significant. It strikes me that the writing comes to life where Pascoe the instinctive writer seems to take over from Pascoe the polemicist, as in the acid portrait of Frank (Frank who?), the left-wing author who enters into an unholy alliance with a film promoter of shady antecedents.

Neither novel, then, is entirely successful. But a vital literature must of necessity contain the good, the bad and the indifferent as well as timeless masterpieces. It is a testimony to the health and vigour of Australian writing for one to be able to say that here are two eminently respectable new novels, each of which is nevertheless far below the best that current fiction offers.

*A. P. Riemer is Associate Professor of English at Sydney University.*

**THE PALE BLUE CROCHET CO AT H ANGER C O VER** By. **David Foster** Penguin, **129pp, \$9.99**

**FOX** By Bruce Pascoe **McPhee GribbJe/Penguin, 167pp, \$11.99.**

**Reviewed by A. P. RIEMER**

At the indications are that 1988

will prove an extraordinary

year for Australian fiction.

With only a little more than half of it gone, a remarkable number of books by the high-flyers, by respected writers and by newcomers has already been published.

Even if 1989 brings a drought, it is nevertheless proper to speak of an established national literature. Inevitably, then, questions about the quality of this material are bound to be raised.

These shortish novels by two experienced and well regarded *authors* provide a case in point. David Foster and Bruce Pascoe belong to what might

be-described as the middle generation of currently active writers. Foster has been publishing steadily since the 70s; though *Fox* is Pascoe's first novel, he has earned a solid reputation as a writer and publisher of short stories. Each is a highly competent craftsman, each novel is a respectable, fully professional piece of work. Yet judging them by the highest standards, a compliment both books and both writers deserve. I was left with a sense of dissatisfaction and of opportunities missed.

The disappointment is greater with David Foster. In the 70s and the early 80s, it seemed that he would make an outstanding contribution to Australian writing — an eccentric, larrikin voice, a writer given to almost puerile jokes and word games; yet an artist with a unique, if somewhat weird, vision. *Moonlite* and *Plumbum* are complex, disturbing, at times infuriatingly obscure fables but both possess an urgency, a sense of an intelligence grappling with large, often perplexing issues in a consistently interesting if not always clear manner.

*Dog Rock*, to which *The Pale Blue Crochet Coathanger Cover* is a sequel, marked a notable relaxation of the difficulties of Foster's earlier work. A writer may be allowed to indulge in holidays as much as anyone else: *Dog Rock* is an amiable shaggy-dog story about crime in a small town in the Southern Tablelands, its central character, D'Arcy D'Oliveres, postman, beekeeper and British aristocrat in disguise, is an engagingly laconic and vernacular narrator.

But Foster's holiday has continued in subsequent books. The sequel has even less substance than *Dog Rock*: it is in quite specific terms a shaggy-dog story, since most of it consists of D'Arcy's monologue to a particularly hirsute canine about the investigations into the death of Captain Hooch, *Dog Rock*'s leading bikie and the dog's former owner. There is nothing to be said about the crime and the mystery, which involve post-boxes, the artificial insemination of cows and a particularly adventurous donkey, for all this is merely a peg on which Foster hangs a series of comic routines and observations. Much of the novel is highly amusing, Foster's obsession with the complex bureaucracy of Australia Post is typically compelling yet the abiding impression is that he is replicating familiar and successful devices. What is lacking is the crazy erudition of *Dog Rock*. The subtitle of that novel, *A Postal Pastoral*, identifies the odd reliance of this tale of a beekeeping postie and twentieth-century remittance man on Virgil's pastorals and on pastoral romances like the Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*. Even if readers are unfamiliar with such

admittedly recondite works, the care Foster took to find equivalents for the characteristic ingredients of pastoral literature left its mark on the tight organisation and ingenious plot of *Dog Rock*. *The Pale Blue Crochet Coathanger Cover*, as its title suggests, concentrates on eccentric comedy to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Nobody could accuse Bruce Pascoe of a lack of seriousness. It would take a particularly red-necked insensitivity to find fault with the subject-matter of Fox.

Here is an instance of the classic fugitive story. Jim Fox, on the run from the police after assaulting his father (who subsequently dies, thus making Fox technically guilty of murder),