

Article

Antipodean and Biblical Encounter: Postcolonial Vernacular Hermeneutics in Novel Form

Michele A. Connolly [†]

Catholic Institute of Sydney, Sydney College of Divinity, Strathfield, NSW 2135, Australia;
mconnolly@cis.catholic.edu.au

[†] Michele A. Connolly, rsj.

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Abstract: This article argues that in postcolonial and post-secular Australia, a country in which Christianity has been imported from Europe in the process of colonization in the eighteenth century by the British Empire, institutional Christianity is waning in influence. However, the article argues, Australian culture has a capacity for spiritual awareness provided it is expressed in language and idioms arising from the Australian context. R. S. Sugirtharajah's concept of vernacular hermeneutics shows that a contemporary novel, *The Shepherd's Hut* by Tim Winton, expresses Australian spirituality saturated with the images and values of the New Testament, but in a non-religious literary form.

Keywords: vernacular hermeneutics; Australian spirituality; colonial; landscape; crucifixion; mercy; New Testament

1. Introduction

A fundamental question that must be asked by any postcolonial biblical critic thinking about the relationship between the New Testament and Australia is this: What capacity does the postcolonial and post-secular Australian consciousness have in the first quarter of the twenty-first century to receive the message of the New Testament as a guide for living?

My response in this article to this question is that postcolonial and post-secular Australia has that capacity to embrace Christian faith that comes from walking the journey of life fully engaged with the Australian, postcolonial context in its contemporary, post-secular reality. This journey must be expressed in a contemporary idiom that allows authentic, convincing expression of a spirituality that rings true to Australian experience.

Just such an expression of this spiritual journey is made in the recently published Australian novel, *The Shepherd's Hut*, by Tim Winton.¹ Winton was born in 1960 in the rural town of Scarborough, not far from Perth in the State of Western Australia. In his autobiographical writing, Winton describes a childhood spent close to the Australian bush but also close to the coast where he has surfed from childhood. Of growing up in small-town Western Australia, Winton has said, "I write about small places; about people in small situations. If I get a grip on the geography, I can get a grip on the people."² He has also written that surfing led him to writing. "The child of a pragmatic, philistine and insular culture, I responded," he writes, "to the prospect of something wilder, broader, softer, more fluid and emotional. It sounds unlikely but I suspect surfing unlocked the artist in me."³ Winton has turned his writing skills to defending Ningaloo Reef, a coral reef on the Northern edge of Western

¹ (Winton 2018).

² (Wilde et al. 1994, p. 822).

³ (Winton 2016, p. 132–33).

Australia, working to protect the reef by having the Ningaloo Marine Park and adjacent Cape Range National Park added to the World Heritage Register, in 2011 and beyond that to protest against large multinational mining companies setting up dredging operations in the Park.⁴

Winton has written twenty-nine novels, mostly for adults but some also for children. He has won the major Australian literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award, four times and has been shortlisted for the Book Prize twice.⁵ He writes on Australian life, particularly as it is lived in Western Australia, a vast State which is nine times the size of Texas in the USA.⁶ Winton writes about family life in rural towns, especially about boys growing to manhood in a culture of toxic masculinity, about the Australian landscape and seascape, and increasingly about the environment. The power of the Australian landscape, and father-son relationships are the focus of *The Shepherd's Hut*, which tells the story of two characters whose encounter with each other in the Australian bush leads each to a new place of promise or rest in his life.

The principal character, Jaxie Clackton, is a fourteen-year-old boy who runs away from a violent father and a fear that the law is pursuing him for murder. He escapes into the bush where his bushmanship helps him to survive until he meets the other main character, Fintan, an old man with a mysterious history living alone in the bush. Surviving together in the beautiful but dangerous Australian landscape, the two overcome mutual suspicion and fear, until they finally share both companionship and love. The crisis point of the novel comes when the contemporary criminal world breaks into Jaxie and Fintan's precarious existence in the form of drug runners whose clandestine operation Jaxie has discovered. In the rupture the criminal world makes, the fate of both Jaxie and Fintan is resolved, the former to freedom in a new life and the latter to his final rest.

In this novel, Tim Winton portrays the profoundly spiritual encounter a young postcolonial child of the Australian culture has with himself, with life and death, with the joys and dark terrors of life, all this provoked by a sojourn of survival through the Australian bush. This writing shows that Australian consciousness has a capacity, even an appetite, for spiritual consciousness. In this paper I will argue that the novel regularly employs the specific spiritual language and imagery that comes from the Christian New Testament and that given the popularity of this novelist in his home country, this reveals that Australians can engage with deep spiritual matters as they are expressed in the New Testament. Before embarking on a necessary explication of Australian postcolonial and post-secular identity, it is necessary to clarify that I do not argue that Tim Winton is making an explicitly biblical, Christian or even religious case in this novel. He is not promoting any particular religious institution or stance. It is not that Winton cites the Bible unconsciously. He himself has written about his religious upbringing as a result of his parents' conversion to Christianity in response to marked kindness from a Christian to Winton's father as he recovered from a severe motor accident. Winton describes his family as "a twice-on-Sundays outfit ... unaccountably and unreasonably churchy."⁷ He says that at church he learnt the value of story because "without narrative there is only theological assertion, which is in effect, inert cargo."⁸ Even more specifically, he began to discover through the focus on the Bible, the power of language, especially of metaphor. It became food to his adolescent mind. "Language, I was to discover, is nutrition, manna without which we're bereft and forsaken, consigned like Moses and his restive entourage to wander in a sterile wilderness."⁹ Lyn McCredden writes that "Winton's publicly declared religious values ha[ve] complicated critical debates."¹⁰ This may be because it seems

⁴ (Winton 2018–2019).

⁵ Tim Winton won the Miles Franklin award for his novels, *Shallows* (1984), *Cloudstreet* (1991), *Dirt Music* (2001) and *Breath* (2008). He was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *The Riders* (1994) and for *Dirt Music* (2001). See (Winton n.d.).

⁶ Western Australia's area of 2,527,013 square km, of which a very large amount is desert is 9.4 times the area of Texas at 695,662 square km. For details on Texas and Western Australia see respectively, (McNamee et al. 2019; Area of Australia n.d.).

⁷ (Winton 2016, p. 94).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰ (McCredden and O'Reilly 2014, p. 8).

to pre-empt critical decisions about Winton's intention. I mention Winton's well-known religious background to avoid any suggestion that his use of the Bible is not conscious.

The Shepherd's Hut is saturated with religious sensibility, that is articulated, often with intense irony, in the language of the Bible but particularly of the New Testament. Tim Winton's skill as a novelist ensures that there is no sense of "Bible-bashing" in his novel; his very sure hand with plot and characterization make any expression of spiritual ideas or biblical language sound entirely natural, credible and remote from anything like preaching—while at the same time provoking the reader to thought. For example, in the course of three pages of stream-of-consciousness from the mind of the character Jaxie Clackton, Winton probes the inadequacies of contemporary Christian church and religious ritual; touches on both clericalism and revulsion against clerical sexual abuse; and explores prayer, the need for mercy and the manifold ways in which real people exercise their spirituality.¹¹ It does not read as a treatise on religion in Australia; it reads as a novelistic exposé of the ideas a teenage boy has about religious matters. Many Australian (and non-Australian) readers would be likely to resonate with Jaxie's concerns, to identify with his rejection of shallow religiosity and to recognize themselves in his reaching for a credible and dignified way to express spiritual desire in his life.

The story itself, the beautifully rendered Australian landscape and the development of the characters in the novel, especially of the young anti-hero Jaxie Clackton, express in an unmistakably Australian vernacular a desire for or awareness of such spiritual values as mercy, gratitude and tenderness. While these values are not the exclusive property of the New Testament, they are unmistakably part of its worldview.

Winton does not set out to provide a systematic exposé of the values of the New Testament. Rather, from his obvious familiarity with its language and images, he selects incidental parts to help him construct his characters by having them express or enact these values. Later in this paper, after listing a sample of Winton's allusion to various New Testament texts, I will focus on ideas or images Winton uses from the Gospel of John. The Johannine Jesus' expression of his purpose in terms of having "food to eat;" his identity expressed in the expression, "I am;" concerns about the truth and above all the power of the Word appear in Winton's characterization. However, it is the image of the body strung up, "lifted up" on the cross, echoing the serpent raised up on a standard of Num 21:9, that Winton uses as a *leitmotif* through his novel on which I will concentrate in the final phase of this paper.

The language of the novel is shot through with an ironic juxtaposition between the language and imagery of the whole Bible but particularly of the Christian New Testament on the one hand, and with Jaxie's Australian speech on the other. Winton shows with pleasure how oddly they sit together at the level of diction, yet how truly they speak in concert of the deep issues of life. This writing shows that Australian sensibility can respond to what Jesus of Nazareth teaches in the New Testament. Jesus' vision of God's intent for the world was hard-edged with realism yet insistent on hope in life; Jaxie's vision is equally as hard-edged, as sharp as the knife he whets on stone, but also committed to life and to a fiercely protective tenderness. An Australian consciousness that can express itself in this way has a capacity to hear the message proclaimed by the New Testament.

A. Postcolonial and Post-secular Australia: A Setting for Encounter with the New Testament

In order to develop this argument, it is necessary to establish the idea of Australia as a postcolonial nation, for which postcolonial biblical criticism is relevant. Second, a few words will be useful to clarify what I mean when I refer to the New Testament and its message. Third, it will be important to lay out the relationship between contemporary postcolonial Australia and Christian faith, as it is practiced in publicly recognized churches in Australia. Finally, postcolonial biblical criticism must be discussed, especially the particular form of it that I will use, called "vernacular criticism."

¹¹ See (Winton 2018, pp. 22–24).

1. Postcolonial Australia

Early twenty-first century Australia is properly called “postcolonial” because of its foundation as a colony of the British Empire in the late eighteenth century.¹² Australia is no longer a colony of that Empire but continues in a political relationship with the British Crown. Like Canada, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and a dozen small island nations of the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, Australia conducts its own affairs but with the British Crown as its formal Head of State.¹³ A failed attempt by an Australian Republican Movement to move Australia to a republican form of government by national referendum in 1999 means that for the foreseeable future, Australia will remain a constitutional monarchy, a political arrangement that harks back to Australia’s colonial origins.¹⁴ On this basis, it is appropriate to consider Australia as a postcolonial nation.

Post-secular Australia

Another dimension of contemporary Australia relevant to this paper is Australia’s public attitudes towards religion. It is now widely recognized that in the West, most nations have seen a significant decline in formal public, religious affiliation and practice. Until recently, this reality was ascribed to the influence of secularism, defined by Charles Taylor as involving both “the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church,” and then “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹⁵ However, many theorists now argue that Western nations have moved into what they call “post-secularity,” which they identify not as the opposite of secularity but as “a consciousness that develops within a secular society.”¹⁶ Elaine Graham cites Graham Tomlin as describing the stance of the West to Christianity as “Not hostile to or uninformed about Christianity, often interested in spiritual questions and prepared to face the difficult issues of mortality and meaning. And yet the Church is the last place they would look for answers.”¹⁷ Gary Bouma echoes this assessment, of the place of public religion, writing that, as in other similar secular nations, in Australia “religion and spirituality have seeped out of the monopolistic control of formal organization like church ... [resulting in] vastly increased diversity of both organized religious and private spiritualities.”¹⁸

An expression of this stance that is frequently heard in Australia is the statement that a person is “spiritual but not religious.”¹⁹ It is surely not surprising then, that surveys by both government and church agencies in Australia find that regular forms of religious practice have continued to decline over the last half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first. A media release from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) of 27 July 2017, reporting on the Australian 2016 census, found that “The religious makeup of Australia has changed gradually over the past 50 years. In 1966, Christianity (88 per cent) was the main religion. By 1991, this figure had fallen to 74 per cent, and further to the 2016 figure of 52.1%.”²⁰ More than this, there has been a steady growth in people declaring that they have no religion

¹² Standard treatments of the foundation of Australia from its beginning as a penal colony set up on the banks of Sydney Harbor in 1788 can be found in such historical studies as (Atkinson 1977; Clark 1950; Hughes 1987; Kociumbas 1992); and various chapters from the study of the British Empire in (Louis 1998–1999).

¹³ The full list of nations which are constitutional monarchies is: Canada; Bahamas; Grenada; Australia; Tuvalu; Solomon Islands; New Zealand; Jamaica; Antigua & Barbuda; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Barbados; Saint Lucia; Belize; Papua New Guinea; Saint Kitts & Nevis. See (Galka 2016) for a very helpful series of charts explaining the complex relationships between the United Kingdom and the former colonies of the British Empire.

¹⁴ For a full discussion of the reasons why the referendum failed to support a move to Australia becoming a democratic republic see (McKenna and Hudson 2003, esp. pp. 1–9; 249–52; 273–75; McKenna 1996; McKenna 2004).

¹⁵ (Taylor 2007, pp. 3, 4).

¹⁶ (Dixon 2018, p. 74).

¹⁷ (Dixon 2018, p. 57).

¹⁸ Bouma, Gary D. 2006. *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the 21st Century*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p. 5, cited in (Dixon 2018, p. 74).

¹⁹ See (Taylor 2007, p. 535; Graham 2018, p. 56) for descriptions of the contexts in which people make this assertion.

²⁰ See (Census Data 2017).

at all. The media release notes that “Those reporting no religion increased noticeably from 19 per cent in 2006 to 30 per cent in 2016.”²¹ Bob Dixon interprets the 2011 Australian Census’ data about Australia’s largest religious group, Roman Catholics, examining ten categories ranging from age, ethnic diversity, and changing beliefs of churchgoers through the declining numbers of Australian-born priests and members of religious orders to disillusionment over Catholic Church responses to clergy sexual abuse. He concludes that as one of the largest employers in the country because of its commitment to education, health and social services, the church will continue to be a significant player in the public space, “too big not to engage with.” Nevertheless, at the level of private commitment, Dixon argues that “ordinary Australian Catholics are likely to be increasingly diverse in their religious practices, beliefs, spiritualities and attitudes towards the institutional church.”²²

The Message of the New Testament

This article asks whether contemporary postcolonial Australia has the capacity to engage with the message of the New Testament as a way of living. The twenty-seven documents of various literary styles that constitute the New Testament present a message about Jesus of Nazareth and his religious vision. The New Testament message is that God loves human beings to the point of committing God’s own son to live and die in earthly, mortal condition and to rise to life beyond the limits of death. Christians believe that this death and resurrection of Jesus restored the relationship between God and human beings that had been destroyed by sin, originating with the primordial disobedience against God’s word by the first humans Adam and Eve, but participated in by all human beings. This restoration of relationship by the faithful obedience of Jesus, even to death on a cross, redeemed human beings from the power of Sin and enabled them to participate in the Reign of God, even here and now on earth, that was inaugurated by Jesus’ resurrection from death. God initiated this process of redemption out of love, offering mercy, compassion and forgiveness for no reason other than God’s love for God’s creation. The only price asked to enjoy the benefits of God’s generosity is faith and human readiness to live out the implications of being redeemed by, among other things, expressing God’s mercy and compassion to one another.

This message, of course, has been presented across two thousand years of Christian history not only in the New Testament documents but in a vast range of cultural perceptions of what the New Testament says and means. This article takes as a test case, the perception in contemporary postcolonial Australia of what that message is and whether it is of any value today. This issue will be addressed by a discussion of the way it is treated in a contemporary Australian novel that I argue shows a particularly strong engagement between Australian culture and biblical, especially New Testament, values. How this will be carried out will be explained in section A.2. Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: The Vernacular Hermeneutic below, which discusses postcolonial biblical criticism.

2. Relationship between Contemporary Postcolonial Australia and Christian Faith

i. Christian Faith

There are issues on both sides of this relationship between Christianity and contemporary, postcolonial Australia. Christianity itself faces a two-part challenge that is intrinsic to its character as an historically-based religion. That is, Christian origins are remote in both time and space from contemporary Australia. With regard to time, as an historically based religious tradition, Christianity originated during the first century C.E. in the life and death and proclaimed resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and was brought to Australia in the late eighteenth century by the first European settlers, both by ordained clergy of Christian churches and by believers themselves, even if these believers

²¹ Ibid.

²² (Dixon 2018, p. 91).

were convicts. Both the world of the first century and the world of the eighteenth century are remote in time from contemporary Australia, even the days of the convict settlement of the country.

With regard to space, Jesus of Nazareth lived and the New Testament itself was composed in the ancient Mediterranean. The New Testament was written in the language and literary forms of that place and time. Much more recently those who brought Christianity to Australia came from the Northern hemisphere, from Great Britain, Ireland and to a lesser degree, Europe. The Christianity they brought was inevitably expressed in the language, metaphors, symbolism and worldview of the Northern hemisphere. While the idea of England as “mother” and “home” or of Ireland as “the old country” prevailed in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon settler population of Australia as far as into the early twentieth century, Christian faith experienced in church membership and regular Sunday attendance at worship seemed all of a piece with the larger cultural world view. However, as the nation has grown beyond its bicentenary of the establishment of British culture and as it becomes notably multi-cultural, including peoples who practice religions other than Christianity, and as the post-secular worldview has become normative in Australia, Christianity has ceased to appear to be a natural, unquestioned, necessary part of Australian life.

Rather, Christianity has found it necessary to defend itself as good against accusations that it has historically been the cause of deadly wars and destructive divisions even within itself. In recent times Christianity has been accused of being deeply hypocritical morally as evidenced by the recent exposure of the high degree of sexual abuse perpetrated within churches especially by its clergy. Bob Dixon sums up that on the issue of sexuality in general, in Australia, “For the Church, evil is the deliberate violation of the natural law; for contemporary Australians, especially younger Australians, evil is the deliberate prevention of people from exercising their rights.”²³ A third charge laid against Christian practice is that it promotes an unsustainable fantasy world that has been exposed as delusional by the hard empirical sciences.²⁴

ii. Contemporary Postcolonial and Post-secular Australia

Australia’s postcolonial situation is not the same as any other nation’s reality, even postcolonial nations, because Australia’s history is its own. Founded relatively late in the imperialist period by the British Empire for the inglorious purpose of disposing of Great Britain’s excess convict population, Australia has had to grow into a nation without a clear, long-term goal or purpose beyond the fact of its mere existence.

As Australians struggle amongst themselves in their political connection to the British crown and the Northern hemisphere, they need to establish their own identity in the world, to take themselves seriously. Australians are still working to find their own voice beyond imitation of the greater economic powers and older Northern hemisphere cultures. Australians need to come to serious terms with Australia: with its geo-political location and relationship to the larger, more powerful economies in its history and geography; with its own ecology which is ancient, rare, beautiful and fragile; and with its cultural history and the religious traditions of both the ancient original peoples and of the more recent Northern hemisphere Western culture founding peoples. Australia could benefit from developing a more mature religious sense that allows not only diversity of faith expressions as already exists but also an ability to express values and consciousness that are larger than the solely empirical. Christianity, practiced in Australia since the beginning of British settlement, is one such religious tradition

What can be done is to bring the Australian context, with its history, cultural practices, language and rituals into a realistic encounter with Christianity. Each needs to be able to declare itself truly; neither can dominate over the other; each needs to hear the other at its truest and best, articulating values that Australians can recognize as desirable, as able to help them realize their own best and

²³ (Dixon 2018, p. 89).

²⁴ For prominent discussion of contemporary atheism and its interaction with religion, see (Gray 2018; Carroll and Norman 2017; Martin 2007).

credible selves. One way that enables this to happen is distinctly Australian creative work which connects the worldviews and idioms of both Australia and Christianity. The Australian novelist Tim Winton has done this remarkably well in his recent novel, *The Shepherd's Hut*. The biblical critical methodology of postcolonial biblical criticism, especially a form of it called “vernacular hermeneutics,” makes it possible to show how Tim Winton engages both the Australian context and the Christian worldview with insight, humor and human integrity. This paper will next provide a brief survey of this methodology before treating Tim Winton’s novel in some depth, to show how a non-religious, secular novel can bring both contemporary and ancient biblical cultural issues into suggestive connection with each other.

2. Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: The Vernacular Hermeneutic

Postcolonial Biblical Criticism has been developed since the 1980s in countries which experienced colonization by the imperial powers of Northwest Europe, from the age of exploration to the “new world” on. Nations of the African sub-continent, of India, South and East Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean and Latin America have all contributed to the development of this methodology which reflects on the way the Bible can be, even must be, interpreted in nations in which biblically based Christianity was imported along with military, political and economic imperial takeover of lands, a takeover that suppressed existing indigenous cultures and their sovereignty.²⁵

A scholar who has contributed very strongly to postcolonial biblical criticism is Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah. Born and educated initially in Sri Lanka, Sugirtharajah is Emeritus Professor of Biblical Hermeneutics in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham, UK. He has published widely in the field of postcolonial biblical criticism, shaping the field as he has done so.²⁶ One very important contribution that he has made is a particular mode of postcolonial biblical criticism that Sugirtharajah calls “vernacular hermeneutics.” He defines vernacular hermeneutics as “the indigenization of biblical interpretation.”²⁷ Under this rubric of vernacular hermeneutics, Sugirtharajah has developed a methodology that focuses on culture, beginning with the culture of the interpreter which is therefore valued from the outset of any interpretive process, before moving to read the biblical text for its cultural content. Sugirtharajah has identified three large categories under which first, an interpreter’s culture may be analyzed and then, a biblical text may also be understood. In this way, working by analogy, sympathetic cultural resonances between an interpreter and a sacred text may be identified.

These three categories deal with ideas or concepts; with behaviors, especially deeply significant ritual actions of a culture or a text; and the various material manifestations of a culture in which Sugirtharajah includes language and symbolism. In his words, the cultural content of the interpreter may be grouped under three headings, namely “ideational (world views, values and rules), performantial (rituals and roles) and material (language, symbols, food, clothing, etc.).”²⁸ Once the interpreting culture has been located in this way, it is possible to approach the text to be interpreted by what Sugirtharajah calls “at least three modes of vernacular reading—conceptual correspondence, narrativel [sic] enrichments and performantial parallels.”²⁹ The term “conceptual correspondences” refers to conceptual similarities found in both the culture of production of a text and the culture seeking to interpret it. “Narrativel enrichments” identify the various story-telling strategies by which a culture makes sense of the world to itself, such as, for example, in Australia the strong tendency to tell the story of the unlikely underdog who succeeds by grit, determination and unorthodox methods. Such story-telling practices in the interpreting culture can be set beside narratives in the biblical text to be

²⁵ For an extensive treatment of the modern British imperialism relevant to this paper, see (Louis 1998–1999).

²⁶ Some recent titles of R. S. Sugirtharajah include (Sugirtharajah 1999, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018).

²⁷ (Sugirtharajah 2001, p. 177).

²⁸ Ibid., 182.

²⁹ Ibid. See fuller descriptions of these three modes of reading on pp. 182–90.

interpreted, as a way to access what both cultures have in common. “Performantial parallels” refers to “ritual and behavioral practices which are commonly available in a culture” and which thus provide a cultural commonality between the interpreting culture and that of the text to be interpreted.³⁰

B. Tim Winton’s *The Shepherd’s Hut*: Vernacular Hermeneutics in Novel Form

Winton’s novel is a form of narrativel enrichment of contemporary Australian experience. It tells the story of a young’ mans’ journey through trial to self-discovery and affirmation of himself as a human being and a man. This is a common human story told here in the contemporary Australian context. Vernacular hermeneutics makes it possible to show that this particular novel does the work of vernacular hermeneutics because in its telling of the tale, the novel constantly moves from the interpreting culture to biblical texts to be interpreted—in such a way that new light is shed on them.

In the second half of this article, I will argue that Winton’s *The Shepherd’s Hut* brings Australian postcolonial vernacular culture into productive, often rueful and sometimes delightful conversation with biblical values, especially those of the New Testament. I do not argue that Winton has in any sense, consciously set out to use what R. S. Sugirtharajah names “vernacular hermeneutics.” However, I do assert that what Winton has done is able to be accounted for by the insights of vernacular hermeneutics, which Sugirtharajah himself declares is not a new methodology but has a long history in human interpretation.³¹ In the novel, all three categories of the cultural world of the interpreter can be found, that is the performantial (focused on rituals and roles); the material (surfacing in language, symbols, food and clothing and other material manifestations of culture) and the ideational (expressing world view and values). As an interpreter of this novel in its vernacular interpretation of an Australian experience in connection with the worldview of the Bible, especially the New Testament, I will show that all three modes of vernacular hermeneutics operate within the novel.

1. The Wild Colonial Boy

A brief plot survey of the novel is that it is told in the first-person voice of a teenaged Australian boy who reviews recent events, indeed his whole life, in which he survived brutality at home, months in the Australian bush on the barest resources, and finally risked life itself in combat with deadly criminals. Its plot is that of a thriller; its meaning is profoundly spiritual. Much of this meaning emerges in a months-long encounter between the young anti-hero narrator, Jackson (Jaxie) Clackton and the mentor figure of Fintan MacGillis, the failed Irish priest who learned to survive as a civilized man in the Australian wilderness. The novel opens in Jaxie’s present moment but then flashes back to the past that has led him to this moment, both the immediate past which creates the plot of the novel and the whole of Jaxie’s brief past life. This reveals his origins and the joys and sufferings that have prepared him to engage in the hero’s survival and self-discovery journey in the Australian bush.

As the journey of the anti-hero, the novel is very concerned with Jaxie’s discovery of his own identity as a young Australian male. As the son of the town butcher who passed off ill-gotten horsemeat as beef, Jaxie is derided in his hometown as “Jaxie Horsemeat.”³² Fintan gives him a new name as “the wild colonial boy,” singing to him lines from a famous colonial Australian ballad about an Irish teenaged boy who led a life of crime in Australia and was eventually shot by the police. The lines Fintan sings tell Jaxie’s history as a son, prophesy some criminal acts that Jaxie in fact will commit in the course of the novel and sums him up, “*A terror to Australia was the wild colonial boy.*”³³ Here we see Jaxie cast in a distinctly Australian colonial role, a role harking back to Australia’s convict origins. The meaning of this colonial ballad in the novel can be accounted for by both the material and the performantial dimensions of vernacular hermeneutics. The material dimension, attentive to

³⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

³¹ Ibid.

³² (Winton 2018, p. 43).

³³ (Winton 2018, pp. 108–9), italics in the original text.

language and symbols, highlights the resonance this ballad has in Australian ears, who recognize it as a very typical expression of the colonial era. The performantial category of vernacular hermeneutics identifies the role of “the wild colonial boy” as larger in meaning than just a joke nickname from the old man; it reveals that Jaxie is still at risk of being cast in a criminal role of the colonial past. Jaxie’s task is precisely to acquire *postcolonial* status, to leave his wrecked youth behind, to negotiate what life throws in his path and to achieve a future that is free. The attentive reader will be encouraged that Jaxie might succeed by his assertion in the opening section of the novel, “For the first time in me life I know what I want and I have what it takes to get me there.”³⁴

2. The Vernacular Hermeneutics of the Wild Colonial Boy

It is important to note that the movement from the culture of postcolonial Australia in the person of Jaxie making sense of the world to the spiritual world expressed by the Bible begins from Jaxie’s distinctly Australian speech, his “ocker” vernacular. It is clearly the only language available to him from his up-bringing. It is frequently grammatically incorrect, uses crude, often abbreviated vocabulary, and an abundance of four-letter words to express surprise, consternation but very often fear and loathing. Fiona Morrison cites the Australian postcolonial scholars Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, arguing that the vernacular language “comprises ‘the complex of speech habits which characterize the local tongue, or even the evolving . . . local English [sic] of a monolingual society trying to establish its link with place’.”³⁵ Vernacular hermeneutics, under the heading of the “material,” recognizes this movement from the interpreting culture to the text to be interpreted as a culturally necessary progression from the known and valued to the unknown, yet to be evaluated.

a. Jaxie’s vernacular speech evokes and interacts with biblical discourse

Since the novel is narrated in Jaxie’s voice, it is filled with examples of his speech. He is given to particularly Australian similes to describe his experiences. Some are perhaps learned expressions; others are Jaxie’s own invention. Describing his thirst, Jaxie says he is “dry as a camel’s cookie”; water in the swimming hole was so cold it was “brass monkeys”; something that clings “stuck like shit to a blanket”; an unpleasant surprise was “like a kick in the clacker”; and a place riddled with snakes is as “snaky as fuck.”³⁶ While, as we will see, Jaxie can at certain moments express the beauty of the Australian landscape, he also recognizes his isolation in a place that he calls “bumfuck nowhere.”³⁷ When he shoots a bungarra, a goanna, to avoid starvation, he laments the death of the animal in a backhanded, laconic fashion. He asks himself how his culture would interpret the sudden, violent loss of life for an animal supremely at home in its world and answers with an expression he’s learned. “What do they say? Rooster Sunday, feather duster Monday.”³⁸

Yet, Jaxie is open to learn, seen when he turns the word “cogitate” over in his mind and his mouth, a word he learned from Fintan. In this, he is like many Winton characters, for whom, writes Lyn McCredden, “A preoccupation with words—written, spoken storytelling, vernacular, lyrical, humorous, abject, ideological—is central.”³⁹ “Cogitate,” Jaxie says “that’s a word I didn’t even know back at the diggings but I like the sound of it.”⁴⁰ Jaxie likes the sound of it because he is a poet and he is hungry to learn what is real. The material dimension of vernacular hermeneutics recognizes Jaxie as a poet when he describes the Australian landscape because his language is specific with the perceptions of his eyes, his sense of smell and his feeling of texture. When he encounters the natural world Jaxie is fully alive in his senses. Early on his journey, he describes the Australian landscape at

³⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁵ (Morrison 2014; Rooney 2014, p. 53).

³⁶ For these expressions in sequence, see pp. 48, 81, 88, 92, 114.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

³⁹ (McCredden 2016, p. 19).

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

night: “That night the stars come out early and clear as I’d ever seen them and I could smell everything in the bush round me. I tasted smoke and gum sap in the air. Moths and bugs heavy as birds bumped and skidded off me.”⁴¹

As he journeys the next day, Jaxie “... come[s] into the valley where everything was cool and shadowy and the salmon gums were shivering with birds.”⁴² The material dimension of vernacular hermeneutics suggests at least two resonances here with the biblical text. First, when the Australian postcolonial subject comes into an open-eyed encounter with the Australian landscape, he talks about it with ease and authority, naming it as Adam did the creatures of God’s handiwork.⁴³ Indeed, as Jaxie describes the valley, it has a hint of Eden about it: just as the man and his wife walk in the Edenic garden at the time of the evening breeze, where they hear the sound of God walking (Gen 3:8), so Jaxie notes the cool of the vegetation and a shivering spiritual presence created by birds in the salmon gums. For Jaxie, being in the bush, a longing to learn and birds create a state of peace. “Weird to be thinking of school” he says, “traipsing through the mulga like that. I guess because of them birds and how peaceful it was.”⁴⁴

It is not too far a stretch to remember the wryly humorous injunction of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt 6:26; see also Luke 12:24). Jesus gives this example to tease his audience out of anxiety about the necessities of life. “Do not worry,” says Jesus, “about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt 6:25) In much of this novel, Jaxie is necessarily consumed with protecting his life, with procuring basic food and drink for survival and the bare minimum of clothing. Yet in the midst of his struggle to survive, he also experiences the beauty of the place, the compassion of Fintan, the reality of small mercies poured on him in the provision of food, drink, clean water, fire, human comfort and conversation, what amounts to civilization.

There are numerous examples where Jaxie’s vernacular and the biblical language interact with each other. Very early in their encounter, when Fintan knows Jaxie is spying on him from the bush, but hasn’t declared himself, Fintan announces out loud, “To everything a season.” To this Jaxie replies, but only to himself, “And I’m thinking what the fuck.”⁴⁵ Fintan’s first phrase is a direct biblical quotation, from Ecclesiastes 3:1; Jaxie’s bewildered reply is a pure vernacular response. This is one of many exchanges in which the biblical text or imagery is juxtaposed sharply with postcolonial Australian vernacular language in a deceivingly simple but effective way. The interchange between the two characters works very credibly in the novel at the matter-of-fact level, revealing the character of the speakers and their worldviews. Yet for the biblically-alert audience, there is an enjoyable play of irony as we hear the two dictions, that of the Scriptures and that of the biblically innocent postcolonial Australian, playing back and forth with each other. Only in this contemporary Australian environment is this interchange credible, but here, as Winton constructs it, it teases the mind with the possibility that the ancient biblical text speaks into this context that is so remote from it in both place and time.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴² Ibid., p. 75.

⁴³ See Gen 2:19–20, “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.” [emphasis mine]. Biblical translation here and elsewhere in the paper is taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

b. *Jaxie, the Hero Explorer “On the Way”*

As he steps out through the mulga scrub, Jaxie follows every Australian explorer of the inland desert, such as the ill-fated Burke and Wills, the somewhat more fortunate Ludwig Leichhardt, and the first European man to cross the Nullarbor Plain, Edward John Eyre. At the same time, much of Winton’s description of Jaxie’s travel echoes the biblical story of journey. Early in the novel Jaxie faces the agony of choice between the road back to regular society which offers comfort but probably also legal trouble and the rough road of a path through the inland, beyond human habitation. It was, he says, “the highway or the wildywoods.”⁴⁶

The large biblical story evoked by this choice is that of the ancient Israelite people’s forty-year trek through the wilderness, told in the Old Testament Books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. In the New Testament, Jesus’ preaching journey to proclaim the “reign of God” is called being “on the way,” on the *hodos*. Both are journeys of self-discovery through trials of endurance and deprivation, the first for the people of Israel and the latter for Jesus. This certainly is also the case with Jaxie. The plot of the entire novel traces his journey from an abusive home to being within striking distance of his brief life’s goal, namely untrammelled freedom with the girl he loves. Within this larger journey there are smaller journeys: having discovered the prospector’s hut, Jaxie makes a trip to collect salt, in the course of which he discovers the shepherd’s hut. From there he makes several shorter trips to hunt wild game but then a final series of explorations to locate the mysterious noise that tells him he and Fintan are not alone and safe in the bush. The final journey back to the shepherd’s hut to protect Fintan when he could simply have run away brings all Jaxie’s search for self-identity and moral integrity to fulfilment so that he is truly free afterwards to continue on the journey he had begun months before.

These journeys are satisfying as the content of a novel; for the postcolonial biblical scholar, alerted by the performantial dimension of vernacular hermeneutics to the role of explorer and the ritual of journeying, these journeys become symbolic of the human search for meaning and life. For the Biblically-literate reader, the background of both the Old and New Testament uses of the journey theme adds great richness to this symbolism. For the purposes of this paper, this close connection between a contemporary Australian story in the distinctly Australian landscape and the ancient biblical narratives shows that there is a capacity in Australian consciousness to hear the deeply human account of encounter between God and human beings that the Scriptures express.

In the final section of this paper, I will treat some of the most outstanding features of the novel as themes exploring the experiences of the postcolonial subject in the Australian environment that can be seen as related to the Bible. Where relevant I will continue to point out which of the three dimensions of vernacular hermeneutics most clearly identifies the cultural features being expressed.

C. Themes of Tim Winton’s *The Shepherd’s Hut* in Relation to the New Testament

The novel is shot through with quotations from and allusions to the Bible, especially the New Testament. Lest the reader doubt the presence of the biblical word, Winton has Jaxie remark, well into his time at the shepherd’s hut, that Fintan regularly recited texts he knew by heart, “Poems and bits of the Bible and that and he said them to me pretty often by the fire after dark.”⁴⁷ One of these biblical snatches turns up when Jaxie reminisces that Fintan compares himself and Jaxie to the biblical figures of “the original odd couple, a veritable David and Jonathan.”⁴⁸ Part of the pleasurable irony of Winton’s construction of these characters is that Jaxie has no idea what Fintan’s reference means. Vernacular hermeneutics notes that a distinctly Australian scenario can be accounted for, even if ironically, by allusion to a famous biblical image, that of the deep bond between David and his friend Jonathan.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁹ See 1 Sam 18:1–20:42 for the tale of the brief but intense and politically fraught relationship between the young warrior David and the Jonathan, the son of King Saul against whom David was engaged in conflict.

1. Old Testament Themes in *The Shepherd's Hut*

We have already seen that the novel presents Jaxie's journey in terms of walking through the biblical Eden, but also in a way that echoes the wilderness journey portrayed in the book of Exodus. Winton does not, however, romanticize this allusion to biblical scenes. While Jaxie and his girlfriend Lee sometimes get away by themselves to swim at the reservoir or to patches of bush around town, theirs was no idyllic Adam and Eve relationship. The natural world was not in fact enough for them: they needed civilized privacy. As Jaxie said, "When all you get is dead grass and asbestos roofs and the stinky shade of the grandstand, the idea of a proper room is deadset luxury."⁵⁰ Fintan can describe aspects of the landscape, such as the moon rising over the salt lake in religious terms such as "Behold," (used in the Scriptures to, among other things, announce a momentous event), asking if the moon's presence "Doesn't [make] some small part of you shrivel in awe," saying it is "Like the wafer," (the Eucharistic bread).⁵¹ Nevertheless, in less transported moments, he can use other biblical language to name their place of isolation as a "forsaken wilderness," echoing the language of Isa 27:10, "For the fortified city is solitary, a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness." Thus, place or material setting is a very important theme in the novel, being presented in a way that evokes biblical traditions of the capacity of place and material reality to provide occasions for encounter with divinity.

A second important and resonant theme in the novel is food. At the shepherd's hut the work of hunting it, shooting or killing, preparing it and preserving it is a never-ending round of survival. The food that keeps the body alive is hard to come by. However, Jaxie is fed by another kind of food which sustains him emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. This food is the motivation that keeps him moving beyond the shepherd's hut. Instead of settling at the edge of the desert for the rest of his life as Fintan appears to have done, Jaxie always remains determined to move on to a goal beyond that place. The reason he is able to do this is his relationship with Lee, who he trusts is waiting for him if he can only reach Mt. Magnet where she lives. Even when he can no longer look at pictures of her on his phone, Jaxie finds that he has her image in his memory. "I had the light of her in me," he says. In an image recalling the gift of the manna the Israelite people received in the wilderness (see Exod 16:11–16) Jaxie says her presence in his memory "was like food falling from the sky."⁵² The allusion is obvious to anyone with a small familiarity with the Bible; Winton has put it credibly on the lips of a boy who has foresworn church and is wary of praying. The postcolonial subject who rejects organized religion can nevertheless be heard speaking tenderly and with gratitude in biblical terms of a gift from the heavens. This is vernacular biblical hermeneutics in novelistic action. It expresses in the contemporary Australian vernacular a credible experience that is open to the encounter with a spiritual experience of gifts from God, of which the Bible speaks.

A third major theme in the novel that echoes both the Old and New Testaments is that of fleshliness with its potential of death, especially as expressed in the slaughter of animals for food. This theme ranges on a sliding scale from a focus on sheer materiality to a spiritually rich perception of bodies. An awareness of the performational aspect of vernacular hermeneutics, focusing on roles and rituals, highlights the significance of this novel's treatment of bodies.

An early scene in the novel shows Jaxie working in his father's butchery where his father has assaulted him, knocking him unconscious and into the container in which rejected meat parts are thrown. Jaxie says he "come to in the bone crate. Woke up arse over and half stupid in the slimy pile of shins and knuckles and chook frames."⁵³ Jaxie is physically immersed in the refuse of butchered animals, feeling reduced to mere animality. From the dead bodies of animals, Jaxie's memory takes

⁵⁰ (Winton 2018, p. 85).

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 223, 228.

⁵² Ibid., p. 199.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 7.

us to the dead bodies of his father, mother and grandmother (Nanna).⁵⁴ His memory of the death of Nanna, the first corpse he saw in his life, is triggered by a highly significant scene in the novel to which I will turn next.

Jaxie's reflection on Nanna's death registers the deep human sense that death confronts us with something disjointed, a body at one moment living but in the next, completely vacant. From seeing his Nanna's dead body, Jaxie says he learned that "She was meat. That's what dead things are. She was gone but not gone."⁵⁵ This memory is evoked for Jaxie by seeing the old man Fintan kill a goat. The goat goes from being alive to being "suddenly floppy as a bathmat."⁵⁶ At the prospector's hut Jaxie has already killed a number of animals in order to survive: a bungarra (a goanna), a euro (like a small kangaroo) and two large kangaroos.⁵⁷ While these scenes explain how Jaxie survives in the wilderness of the Australian bush, each also plants images in the mind of the reader that have spiritual and theological potential. As the size of his kill grows, Jaxie begins to need a gambrel, a device for elevating slaughtered game so that it can be gutted and skinned. When he butchers the first kangaroo Jaxie makes do with bits of rope and wire he has found. He says "I strung that doe up from a dead tree."⁵⁸ By the time the second kangaroo is described, it has become a body "hanging from a gum tree, a body twisting in the wind like some poor bastard's had enough of this prospecting caper ..."⁵⁹ Already, for any biblically-alert person, these scenes evoke the crucifixion of Jesus, which I will discuss in the final section of the paper.

First, however, it is important to note an Old Testament image that is evoked in the scene where Fintan kills the goat. Jaxie's killing of four animals has prepared us to appreciate Fintan's efficiency and skill in trapping, killing and butchering the goat. Observing Fintan, Jaxie remarks, "Bloke's got it all figured out. But he's quick as a snake."⁶⁰ Fintan kills the goats that run feral in outback Australia but his action also alludes to the ancient Jewish practice of slaughtering a goat annually for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Lev 16:1–34 details the instructions God gave to Moses, to be followed by Aaron, the Jewish High Priest. On a set annual date, the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 16:29) the High Priest is to take "two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering." (Lev 16:5) One of the goats is to become the scapegoat onto whom the sins of the people will be symbolically transferred and banished into the wilderness (Lev 16:20–22). The other goat is to be a sin offering, slaughtered, its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat of the sanctuary and its entire body burned outside the camp because of "the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins (Lev 16:15–16, 27)."

Fintan has a civilized situation with not only shelter, water, vegetables growing, a yard in which to trap animals and a sharp knife for slaughtering, but also "a gambrel that twisted a bit in the wind."⁶¹ On this, he strings up the goat and butchers it cleanly in what is clearly a practiced ritual. The detailed description of this process embeds the image in the mind of the reader; it will not be until later in the novel that the reader will realize that it is highly appropriate that Fintan can do this so well because he is a priest, someone whose role in ancient times was to slaughter animals in ritual sacrifice. At the same time, Jaxie slowly uncovers that Fintan is in the wilderness as a punishment for a crime he has committed as a priest. The crime has to do with money, not the sexual abuse of children that Jaxie fears.⁶² It is as though Fintan, still alive and a priest, not only slaughters goats but is a kind of

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13, 23 for the death of Jaxie's father; pp. 23, 38 for the death of his mother and pp. 98–99 for the death of Nanna.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, pp. 61 for the bungarra; 67–68 for the euro; 69–70 for a grey kangaroo and 73–74 for a red kangaroo.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶¹ See *Ibid.*, p. 95 for a description of Fintan's hut.

⁶² See *Ibid.*, pp. 230–31 for Fintan's description of his criminal behaviour.

scapegoat himself, carrying away into the wilderness, the sins of the people. Nevertheless, the primary, abiding image is of the slaughtered body strung up on high. Here we see both the material and the performational aspects of culture operating together as language constructs an intense image that expresses the ritual of slaughter by someone in the role of a priest. Australian capacity to envisage a goat or a native animal slaughtered in the ritual process portrayed very credibly in this novel is the kind of capacity that could begin to grasp and value a relationship with the divine transacted through animal sacrifice and even human sacrificial death that becomes spiritual food. This image of the body elevated on high carries the biblically alert reader's mind from the world of the Old Testament into that of the Christian scriptures.

2. New Testament Themes in *The Shepherd's Hut*

In the New Testament, the image of the body raised up on high is that of Jesus of Nazareth crucified. This image is central to everything the New Testament has to say, whether narrated in all four canonical Gospels, or reflected on in the letters, or treated symbolically in the Book of Revelation. In *The Shepherd's Hut*, Tim Winton cites or alludes to many of these New Testament documents. As Jaxie grows to self-awareness, particularly in his reflections on mercy and thankfulness there are echoes of the Gospel of Matthew. When both Jaxie and Fintan both mistake first trees and then rocks for men, there seem to be strong but reverse allusions to Jesus' two-part healing of the blind man of Bethsaida who saw men but thought they looked like trees, in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 8:22–26).⁶³ Jaxie's wonderful yet also highly ironic discovery and acceptance that he is indeed, "an instrument of God," cites both 2Tim 2:20–21 and Acts 9:15–16. Similarly ironic but profoundly true is Jaxie's identity as "the end of the world" or "the end of days" as Fintan thinks he must be, which picks up the apocalyptic language of Dan 7:13, Mark 13:7 and 2 Pet 3:10 and the Book of Revelation as a whole.⁶⁴ These allusions and others saturate the novel, articulating its themes, providing its characters with language and behaviors that are rich in their power to evoke spiritual reality. Each of these images or concepts is well worth exploring but cannot be treated in the present paper.

a. Johannine Themes in *The Shepherd's Hut*

The image of the body raised up on high, however, is developed in a quite specific way in the Gospel of John and will be the focus for the remainder of this paper. Brigid Rooney notes that the Gospel of John is one of Winton's two favorite Gospels, the other being the Gospel of Luke. Rooney cites Winton saying that "Luke and John, doctor and mystic respectively, correspond to the 'two halves of my upbringing.'" ⁶⁵ Even before turning to this image it is worth noting that this novel is shot through with Johannine ideas and symbols.⁶⁶ Just to mention some of the most obvious, Jaxie says that a euro he shot "was meat tasted like nothing you ever had in your life."⁶⁷ This invites the memory of the Johannine Jesus telling his disciples "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (John 4:32). Ultimately, despite initial denial, Jaxie agrees with Fintan that he was "sent . . . destined."⁶⁸ This echoes an important aspect of Johannine Christology that is based on Jesus calling himself the one who was sent by his Father, who is often named as "the one sending me."⁶⁹ Worthy of a paper by itself is the lengthy discussion between Jaxie and Fintan when they have just met each other and each is trying

⁶³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91 for Jaxie mistaking rocks for people and pp. 225–28 for Fintan's perception of the stones walking and dancing in the sunlight.

⁶⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 4 for the "end of the world" citation and p. 134 for the "end of days."

⁶⁵ (Rooney 2014, p. 242).

⁶⁶ For two fine works on symbolism in the Gospel of John, see (Koester 1995; Lee 2002).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

⁶⁹ See the following references in the Gospel of John where the Father of Jesus is referred to by use of the participial phrase, "the one (or the Father) sending me." It is declined grammatically in the four most frequently occurring cases: the nominative, accusative, genitive and dative. See John 1:33; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 37; 6:38–39, 44; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 12:44–45, 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5.

to discover the identity of the other, to know whether or not he is a threat. It is effectively a trial as each one probes, feints, and attempts to avoid giving himself away. At the outset, when Fintan has suggested a likely scenario for Jaxie's sudden unexplained appearance in the bush, Jaxie responds "If you say so," which he then repeats.⁷⁰ Ears attuned to the Johannine Gospel hear behind Jaxie's dismissive remark, Jesus' reply in his interrogation by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, "You say that I am a king." (John 18:37). Jesus goes on to say that he has come to proclaim the truth, to which Pilate famously replied "What is truth? (John 18:38). Fintan presses Jaxie with the questions "Is that the truth?" and "... does the truth mean something to you?"⁷¹

Because it is a novel built from words, but also because the novel explores human relationships, it is appropriate that in their first conversation Fintan and Jaxie finally agree that they have no option but to take each other at their word (p. 133). Fintan's final word in this encounter between them is "There you are in your beginning and here am I near my end."⁷² Here we hear echoed not only the Johannine Prologue which opens "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), but also the Johannine narrator's comment about Jesus that having loved his disciples "in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Of course, sitting behind the terms "beginning" and "end" is a concept of God's own self as the beginning and end of all that there is. Typical of the way language and thought operate in this novel, Fintan's summation is true at a simple, matter-of-fact level in the lives of both characters. This truth then lends authenticity to the other, spiritual level of meaning that brings biblical ideas into consciousness through ordinary Australian speech.

Later in Winton's novel, a most distinctive Johannine idiom appears, when Fintan explains that the ancient Australian landscape says to him: "Here I am, son, still here. I was here before the likes of you and yours were born. Before you even drew breath, I am."⁷³ For the biblically-literate reader, this is quite a stunning statement. The assertion, "I am" is used in at least three different grammatical modes in the Gospel of John.⁷⁴ Its power in that Gospel stems from an ancient self-declaration of God who replied to Moses' request for a name for him, "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14). Its power in Winton's novel stems from the sense of sacrilege Jesus created when he used this name for God to identify himself, when he asserted provocatively to his fellow Jews, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Fintan's speech recalling Jesus' self-declaration brings into powerful exchange, an ancient biblical name for God and the presence of God that can be felt in the Australian context, by someone who takes the time to feel its presence and to see that it is "a rare and beautiful place... With a memory."⁷⁵ This is vernacular hermeneutics in practice, the material aspect of culture in the texture of its location conversing with the biblical text, enriching its ancient meaning by expanding its frame of reference. This is precisely the work that the postcolonial vernacular hermeneut of the biblical text must do. Through the medium of Fintan MacGillis, Winton achieves this in the narrativel enrichment of contemporary Australian consciousness that his novel makes.

Alerted by these allusions to the Gospel of John, the biblically-conscious reader sees the regularly recurring image of the slaughtered animal strung up on a gambrel as an evocation of the image of "one lifted up" found only in the Gospel of John. As with the name, "I am," this phrase in the Gospel of John carries forward into Christian interpretation of the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, a powerful symbolic ancient Jewish image. In this case, the image is of a serpent lifted up on a standard. The story behind this symbol is told in Num 21:5–9, about serpents biting and killing the people of Israel in the

⁷⁰ (Winton 2018, p. 127).

⁷¹ Ibid., pp 132, 133.

⁷² Ibid., p. 135.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 152.

⁷⁴ See (Brown 1966, pp. 533–38) for "Appendix IV: EGŌ EIMI—"I AM," which lists John 8:24, 28, 58 and 13:19 as places where "I am" is used without a predicate; 6:20 and 18:5 as instances where a predicate may be understood even if not expressed; and 6:35, 51; 8:12 (9:5); 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6 and 15:1, 5 as examples of the phrase being used with a predicate in the nominative case.

⁷⁵ (Winton 2018, p. 152).

wilderness. The solution God offered Moses was that if the people gazed on a brazen serpent set up on a standard, they would be healed of any snake bite.⁷⁶ Uniquely in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to his impending crucifixion as being “lifted up.” In the three places where this expression is used (see John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34), Jesus is identified as the Son of Man, the ancient Jewish figure associated with triumph through suffering and to whom sovereignty over all peoples is granted by God (see Dan 7:13–14). As this Jewish symbolism is used in the Gospel of John, the ghastly image of the crucified Jesus is reframed as a figure raised up on high to be enthroned and invested with power, especially the power to heal all those who will contemplate it. Winton’s steady construction of the image of the animal raised up on the gambrel already listed above (see C.1 Old Testament Themes in *The Shepherd’s Hut*) builds a high sense of ritual that expresses in the language of the colonial hunter, a sensitivity to a deeper meaning. This deeper meaning touches on the value of each life that is taken. When he has to leave a large red kangaroo carcass in order to fetch salt with which to preserve it, Jaxie says “I guess it’s a rotten thing to do, bowl a roo over and just leave him there.”⁷⁷ At the same time, the novel presents very plainly, the reality of hunger that legitimates taking life. Jaxie says that when he shot his first animal he was “gagging for a feed,” and that when he shot the euro he “cored a loin out of him and ... et it raw.”⁷⁸ It is because killing the game is so necessary that Jaxie can observe the contradiction that while a bullet can “do that kind of damage. It was beautiful.”⁷⁹

Invitations to hear a Johannine theology speaking through these scenes come first when Jaxie describes the challenge of butchering his first kangaroo with only a sharpened butter knife. Because it was too difficult to do the task fully, he says he “left the legs whole. Used a rusty iron bar to bust the shins. Wasn’t pretty but it done the job.”⁸⁰ This description brings to mind the Johannine depiction of the death of Jesus where, to hasten the deaths of the two criminals crucified either side of Jesus, the soldiers break their legs, but do not break the legs of Jesus because he is already dead (John 19:32–33). Given that Jesus died at the time of the Jewish Passover feast, this unique Johannine detail accesses the stipulation in Exod 12:46 and Num 9:12 that when the lamb was prepared for this feast, none of its bones were to be broken. As Francis Moloney explains, “Scripture is fulfilled as the Passover Lamb is slain without a bone being broken (cf. Ps 34:20–21; Exod 12:10, 46; Num 9:12).”⁸¹ Winton takes the fulfilment of this text one step further, bringing it into conversation with the Australian postcolonial vernacular. This makes it possible for Australian consciousness to hear the gospel story as something spoken in a language that contemporary Australia knows.

Late in the novel, Winton begins to apply this language of stringing up to both Jaxie and Fintan. First, Jaxie recounts his sadness at killing a big red kangaroo. He says he “felt kind of sick” when the animal fell and that there was always “this sad feeling” when he had to kill any animal that like the ‘roo, had “a big round cow eye” that seemed to accuse him of his violent act.”⁸² Jaxie says that when he had this roo strung up, “I looked at his big brown eye and saw meself, a reflection of me ... and I had this mad idea, like there it is, Death, that’s me, that’s what I am.”⁸³ Here, in the picture of himself reflected back in the mirror of the kangaroo’s eye, Jaxie is confronted with the idea of himself as an agent of Death, which he finds depressing. Jaxie’s depressed mood issues in a dream a little later where he realizes that an animal that is strung up is not a goat or a kangaroo but himself, as “a beast with all the wildness bled out of him.”⁸⁴ Perhaps this scene registers Jaxie’s subconscious awareness that he must move on from the shepherd’s hut lest he stagnate. For the purposes of this paper, we note

⁷⁶ See (Budd 1984, pp. 232–34) for a full historical-critical exposition of this story in the Book of Numbers.

⁷⁷ (Winton 2018, p. 73).

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 61, 68.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

⁸¹ (Moloney 1998, p. 505).

⁸² (Winton 2018, pp. 183–84).

⁸³ Ibid., p. 185.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 236.

that it shows this novel exploring a deeply resonant cultural symbol, that of the dead animal strung up for slaughter in a way that invites conversation with the similarly deep imagery of bodies lifted up in the Bible. The “material” practices of culture in the form of language, symbols and food and the “performantial” in the form of the ritual practice of slaughtering express the capacity contemporary Australian consciousness has to engage with the biblical story.

Second, Fintan himself introduces the idea that he is a man strung up. In the final, profound conversation that he and Jaxie have, watching the moon rise over the salt lake, Fintan describes his truly priestly concern to communicate who God is to Jaxie as “the rusty hook I dangle from. In some pain, I might add.”⁸⁵ Dangling from this hook, Fintan makes two wonderful statements, one about God and the other about Jaxie. About God, Fintan speculates that “God is what you do, not what or who you believe in.”⁸⁶ His reasoning is that when a person does what is right, brings about the good and makes life better for other people, then he is “an instrument of God, ... joined to the divine, to the life force, to life itself.”⁸⁷ From this, Fintan thanks Jaxie for coming to the shepherd’s hut and making his life better. Because Jaxie has done this, Fintan declares, “Jaxie Clackton, you are an instrument of God.”⁸⁸ Here, as noted already, Fintan speaks the word of God (cf. 2Tim 2:20–21 and Acts 9:15–16), to which Jaxie replies “Get fucked, I said still laughing.” This is another example of vernacular hermeneutics at work in the novel, where Jaxie’s vernacular appears insulting but is, in fact, full of deep gratitude to Fintan, for Fintan’s biblically versed affirmation of him as good, so good that his actions are the very actions of God.

Jaxie’s comment here may seem dismissive of Fintan. It is internally contradictory: a laugh that expresses his delight at Fintan’s affirmation of him as an “instrument of God,” combined with a vulgar insult. The insult is so habitual in Jaxie’s speech that its meaning is determined by the tenor of the conversation in which it happens. Thus, it is possible for Jaxie’s apparent rejection of Fintan’s compliment to him to be a backhanded expression of gratitude. Jaxie is still making sense of himself, the world and his role in it. He is still weighing up the inconsistent behaviour of the frail, life-battered adults that he knows, such as his father and Fintan. In this scene and those that follow immediately upon it, we hear the apparently contradictory reflections of a still-teenaged, emotionally stressed boy, confronting raw issues of survival largely alone.

The novel at this point is close to the culmination of its plot. Briefly, a moment’s absent-mindedness by Jaxie exposed the existence of himself and Fintan to two drug-growing criminals who have a clandestine operation in the area. Jaxie arrives back at the shepherd’s hut to find that the two criminals have found it and are interrogating Fintan violently. Winton creates dramatic irony that bonds the viewpoints of Fintan, Jaxie and the reader as all three know from their perspectives, how cleverly evasive Fintan is in his responses to the criminals. We can hear Jaxie’s affection for the old man as he describes him “nattering away like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth,” with “that rolled-gold look of surprise on” and describing himself more truly than the drug-dealers know, as having been in the game of “pastoral concerns ... fifty years, give or take.”⁸⁹

The criminals torture Fintan by poking him with a knife to find who his accomplice is, the one who left telltale binoculars at their drug-growing site, but Fintan will not tell them anything. They tie Fintan to the gambrel but do not string him up, because as Jaxie reckons “they didn’t know how.” Winton stops short of scripting a human crucifixion but the scene opens with a goat on the gambrel, half-skinned, so the imagery is as present as it can be. Because Fintan can feel Jaxie hiding in the bush nearby, he sings a verse of the ballad “The Wild Colonial Boy,” to warn Jaxie that if he shoots, he will reveal himself and be captured, as was the young man in the song.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 232–33.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 233.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 256–57.

However, while these external events have been happening, other processes have been going on within Jaxie. When faced with the choice, he had decided not simply to run away and leave Fintan alone, as he could have done. Jaxie has grown into the ethical position expressed by Fintan that a person who does what is kind and thus “enlarges” another person’s life, is “an instrument of God.”⁹⁰ This keeps Jaxie determined to rescue Fintan because he decides, “whatever was gonna happen was my fault. It was me responsible.”⁹¹ In this moment, Jaxie acts like a mature adult, prepared to sacrifice his own life for someone else. The reader knows for sure who Jaxie is and what he is: a young man who has experienced being known and loved by someone who then wishes to respond in gratitude. Jaxie has experienced love, what he calls the “dangerous feeling [of] getting noticed, being wanted. Getting seen deep and proper, it’s shit hot but terrible too. It’s like being took over.”⁹²

However, Jaxie is still a teenage boy. He needs his identity and value confirmed for him by someone who knows him well. He sees Fintan for who he is: “... old and lost and sorry and fucked up and still [able to] see so clear and far.”⁹³ Jaxie yearns to hear from Fintan who he is and what he is. These are precisely the questions the criminals ask of Fintan, stabbing him with a knife that stabs Jaxie also with exquisite remorse because it is sharp precisely because it is “... the blade you [i.e., Jaxie] stoned up sharp as a motherfucker to show you’re grateful.”⁹⁴ As Fintan endures the torture, becoming in Jaxie’s eyes “fuller and firmer and prouder” and as the criminals persist, probing Fintan with Jaxie’s own questions about himself, a moment of revelation happens for Jaxie. “All the decent things in him [Fintan] landed. On me. On my head. And I knew where I was and who I was, and what I was.”⁹⁵

Emboldened by this knowledge, Jaxie moves to conclusive action. He shoots the two criminals torturing Fintan, knowing that as an “instrument of God,” this was the right thing to do. He lets Fintan down from the gambrel and there is between them a moment of communion where Jaxie does speak to Fintan but the most important thing is that Jaxie knows “He felt me. He always knew what I was. And now I saw him too.”⁹⁶ It takes only another couple of paragraphs to complete the plot: the burial of the two dead criminals and of Fintan and of Jaxie’s departure from the shepherd’s hut, driving the drug-growers’ vehicle, carrying their petrol, their money and Fintan’s food. For him “peace is on its way. It fucking better be.”⁹⁷ And we have caught up to the present moment with which the novel began, with Jaxie on his way North to what he hopes will be the rest of his life.

3. Conclusions

The point concluding our analysis need only be made briefly. In its culmination and denouement, the novel embodies in its two principal characters Jaxie and Fintan, the values of truth, love and compassion preached by Jesus in the New Testament, values which he underwrote with his own life. The novel affirms that human beings who act with self-forgetting integrity and love towards their fellow human being are indeed, instruments of God. The meaning of being an instrument of God is told in a regular novel, set in a quintessentially contemporary postcolonial Australian setting. Significant parts of the story, especially those parts that lead to its meaning, are told either in explicit citation of or in allusion to the Bible. Especially in the enduring theme of the creature strung up on a gambrel, the central story of the New Testament, the crucifixion of Jesus, is brought into conversation with the postcolonial reality of Australia. The interchange of values between the ancient biblical text and contemporary life in Australia rings utterly true to both cultural worlds. The vernacular hermeneutical methodology of postcolonial biblical criticism is able to show that in his novel, *The Shepherd’s Hut*,

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 233.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 251.

⁹² Ibid., p. 235.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 234.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 262.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 264–65.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 266.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 267.

Tim Winton has actually effected a cultural interchange that demonstrates the capacity that postcolonial Australia has for the spirituality expressed by the New Testament. It is that capacity that can hear its own search for satisfying spiritual life in its own context experience told in language that is authentic to Australia and at the same time open to the Bible's ancient wisdom.

Sugirtharajah defines vernacular hermeneutics as "... a call to self-awareness, aimed at creating an awakening among people to their indigenous literary, cultural and religious heritage."⁹⁸ As Australians engage more fully with their own context, with the joys and challenges, the benefits and limitations of life in the postcolonial antipodean world, they will have more access to their own spiritual awareness and a greater capacity to articulate it. Whether this leads to a higher commitment to organized religion in the traditional mainstream denominations is another question. But it is surely a necessary feature of Australian growth to be able to name in the terms of the Australian context—its environment, its seasons, its ancient indigenous as well as its contemporary multi-cultural society with their value systems—Australian experience, Australian identity and Australian ideals.

In *The Shepherd's Hut*, where all pretense is stripped away, what emerges is the anti-hero, Jaxie Clackton, who can be admired for his courage, intelligence, endurance, perceptiveness and tenderness as he articulates a spiritual view of the world utterly in the Australian vernacular. Some may ask if Jaxie is "redeemed" in the classic sense of Christian theology. The novel presents Jaxie as a work in progress: he has been through a wilderness trial in which he learned not only to survive but to care for another person, to the point where he could risk his own life for him, because it was a responsibility that Jaxie had learned to accept. Jaxie learned this responsibility in the course of daily living and through reflection about life shared with Fintan in the almost palpable presence of the Australian landscape. After all his struggles and to his own amazement, Jaxie describes himself as subject to an "angel feeling. Like you're just one arrow of light."⁹⁹

If Jaxie can be taken as a personification of postcolonial and post-secular Australia, his trajectory in this novel suggests a pathway into spiritual maturation for the nation. As Jaxie came to self-discovery in the Australian wilderness, learning to discern the essential from the superficial, choosing the compassion, mercy and wisdom of Fintan over the bullying, murderous violence of a pair of drug-runners, so postcolonial and post-secular Australia needs to engage with Australia, its history, its place in the world, its very distinct physical landscape whose austere and challenging beauty offers spiritual encounter. Tim Winton's novel, *The Shepherd's Hut*, shows contemporary postcolonial and post-secular Australians that it is possible in this land to be one, focused arrow of light. It is an experience long overdue for this country, one which Winton's novel strongly suggests is truly possible.

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⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 177.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

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