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**Bibliographic citation**

Mead, J (2006). Amanda Lohrey. University Of Tasmania. Chapter.  
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# Amanda Lohrey

(13 April 1947 - )

Jenna Mead  
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BOOKS: *The Morality of Gentlemen* (Chippendale, N.S.W.: Alternative Publishing Co-operative Limited, 1984);

*Australian Studies Overseas: A Guide* (Canberra: Australian Government Publication Service, 1988);

*The Reading Group* (Sydney: Picador, 1988);

*Camille's Bread* (Sydney & New York: Angus & Robertson, 1995);

*The Philosopher's Doll* (Camberwell, Vic: Viking/Penguin, 2004).

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"Politics in Fiction: Something Missing," *Blast*, 8 (Summer 1988): 13-16, 45-46;

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Amanda Lohrey (courtesy of the author)

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- "Reading *Madame Bovary*," *Best Australian Short Stories* 2002, edited by Craven (Melbourne: Black, 2002), pp. 14-39;
- "Ennui," *Best Australian Short Stories*, edited by Craven (Melbourne: Black, 2003), pp. 194-224;
- Untitled, *Scorched: Penguin Australian Summer Stories* (Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2004), pp. 186-201.

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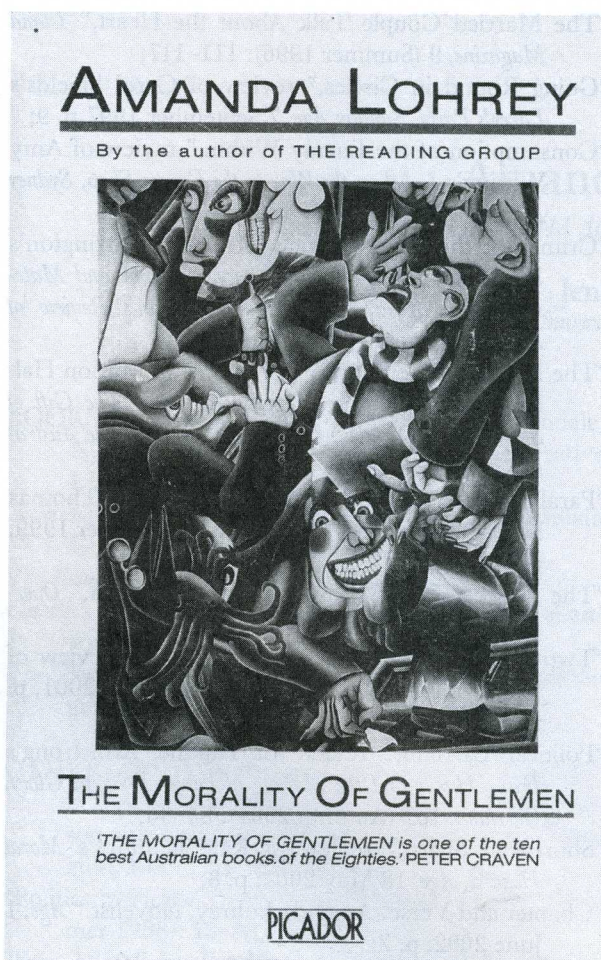
- UNCOLLECTED: Review of Louise Nowra's *Inner Voices*, *Theatre Australia*, 5, no. 12 (1977): 27;
- "The Liberated Heroines: New Varieties of Defeat?" review of Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, Erica Jong's *How to Save Your Own Life*, Alison Lurie's *Love and Friendship*, and Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*, *Meanjin*, 38, no. 3 (1979): 294-304;
- "Brecht as Soap-Opera," review of Robyn Archer's *A Star is Torn*, *The Tasmanian Review*, 5 (1980): 18-19;
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- "Sapphire Ballroom," *Bulletin*, 114 (29 December 1992-5 January 1993): 60-61;
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- "Political Larrikin," review of Pauline Armstrong's *Frank Hardy and the Making of Power Without Glory*, *Overland*, 162 (Autumn 2001): 94-96;
- "Short and Sharp," review of Kate Jennings's *Moral Hazard*, *Age*, 18 May 2002, p. 8;
- "Chapter and Verse: Amanda Lohrey, Novelist," *Age*, 1 June 2002, p. 7;
- "Groundswell: The Rise of the Greens," *Quarterly Essay*, 8 (2002): 1-86;
- "Truth Hidden in a Dozen Stories on Female Authors," review of Lorna Sage's *Moments of Truth: Twelve Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, *Courier Mail*, 28 December 2002, p. 7.

Amanda Lohrey is one of the most significant political novelists of Australia. Lohrey's sensitivity to the limitations of generic writing ensures that her chosen forms—prose fiction and the essay—combine convincing narrative with an acute capacity for social and cultural analysis. Lohrey's fiction emerges from a deep engagement with the social-realist tradition in Australian writing. Over the course of writing four novels, Lohrey's commitment to a political project has necessitated a thorough and intelligent transformation of that tradition, which has enabled not only her own continued development as a writer but also the work of a new generation of critically motivated writers whose prose engages with a politics of everyday life.

Her first novel, *The Morality of Gentlemen* (1984), combines historical documentation and journalistic technique with formalist innovation to produce a novel





Front cover for the 1990 paperback edition of Lohrey's first novel, published in 1984, about a dispute between two workers and a trade union on the Hobart waterfront during the 1950s (Bruccoli Clark Layman Archives)

with the immediacy of reportage and the concreteness of socialist realism shaped by the emotional perspective and rhetorical persuasiveness of the traditional novel. The novel deals with a dispute between two workers and a trade union on the Hobart waterfront in the 1950s, which—despite its legal, industrial, and political ramifications—remains largely ignored by political and social historians. Lohrey's technical choices—a set of discontinuous narratives, each representing the views of a leading player and linked together by the discoveries of a young investigator—draw on the dramatic strategies of epic theater established by Bertolt Brecht, at once estranging the reader from an overly emotional engagement with the characters while insisting on a rigorous and analytic response to the issues raised by the narrative.

As Lohrey's unpublished notebook (circa 1977) shows, her desire to draw history and the novel form

into a relationship that would retain the distinctive function and effect of each required sustained research and analysis. References and notations suggest an aesthetic developed out of her reading of such works as György Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1955); Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death* (1835) and *Woyzeck* (1879); Emile Zola, *Germinal* (1885); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1961); Leon Trotsky, *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature, Politics and Culture* (1972); Brecht and Kurt Weill, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928); and Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953). As Lohrey reminds herself by quoting Benjamin, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really' was (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."

*The Morality of Gentlemen* drew on Lohrey's own personal history and the experiences and political allegiances of her family. Born 13 April 1947 into a working-class family of waterfront workers in the now upmarket Montpelier Retreat, Hobart, Tasmania, Lohrey was educated in Catholic and public schools before completing a degree in political science at the University of Tasmania in 1968. A scholarship for traveling took her to Darwin College, Cambridge, where she read mainly in social theory, although she left without taking a degree. On her return to Australia, Lohrey worked for the Department of Education, and, in the early 1980s, she married Andrew Lohrey, a young politician in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in Tasmania. Her husband's political career, as State Member for Wilmot 1972–1986 and one-time Minister for Primary Industry, and Lohrey's own familiarity with ALP politics gave her privileged access to state politics at a crucial time in the history of both the ALP and the emergence of environmental politics in Australia, which produced the Australian Greens Party. Lohrey's experience and skills as a political analyst and her engagement with the problem of reinventing the middle-class novel as an expression of political thought produced the novel some critics regard as her most profound—*The Reading Group*, published in 1988.

*The Reading Group* follows the later lives of the members of a reading group as the energy of the intellectual Left attenuates and collapses amid the challenge of personal, cultural, and institutional change. In the novel the precise realization of increasingly effete and elitist bourgeois lifestyles is expertly matched by its portrayal of the emotional, social, and personal consequences of such ambiguous economic and social success. In the words of critic Stephen Knight, the form of the novel "is rendered unbalanced by the starkly allegorical character of the contextual events. . . . This fictional city is not Hobart, though it might be; this party



is not Labor in power, though that party could well bring about this situation."

The novel opens with a series of vignettes in which members of the former reading group (and the same political party) are observed midcareer. Their idealist conviction—that reading connected one to history and thus a just future—now serves as youthful memory and moral index to a present moment in which bush fires ring the city; a political underclass roams; repressive legislation is being drafted; an election looms; and the individuals the members have now become, cut loose from a political project, drift in pursuit of their own utopias. The group includes a once ambitious, now self-indulgent, academic; the obsessive house renovator; the pragmatic social worker; the academic's wife, whose hobby is politics; the Minister's clever and savvy bureaucrat; the hard-working schoolteacher; and, in a memorable portrait of masculine narcissism, Lyndon, whose quest for physical perfection and union makes him an unrelenting voyeur and potential pederast. Consistent with the aim in the novel to scrutinize the disjunction between the larger political culture and individual lives, the characters do not offer the reader a point of identification. Instead, as Lohrey remarks on the aesthetics she had developed, in unpublished notes now held in a manuscript collection,

1. In this book all the characters are transparent—you see the world through them but you don't see *them*.

2. None of them *develop*. They just *are*.

3. The relationships between them are barely sketched in + these don't develop either.

4. They exist in a social vacuum, *i.e.*, a *family vacuum*. There is hardly anything in this book about *love*, *children* + *parents*.

*The Reading Group* resists neat closure and conventional satisfactions, but it gains, as a consequence, in breadth, suggestion, economy, and persuasive power. To achieve these effects, the novel was "written cinematically in the way that a film is cut + can be recut." At its core is a sustained commitment to the realities of Australian political modernity: "I wanted to capture the essence of Australia today without referring to actual events, but to capture/create the surreal surface, creating a surreal simulacra of them." For Lohrey, unlike the characters of the novel, "The book is an object of desire. . . . The written word/page has the authority of the father's glance, the mother's work; it yields to the desire to share, to influence, to mould and to move; it both yields up to you, draws you in, as a lover." It was also Lohrey's final word on a traditional conception of

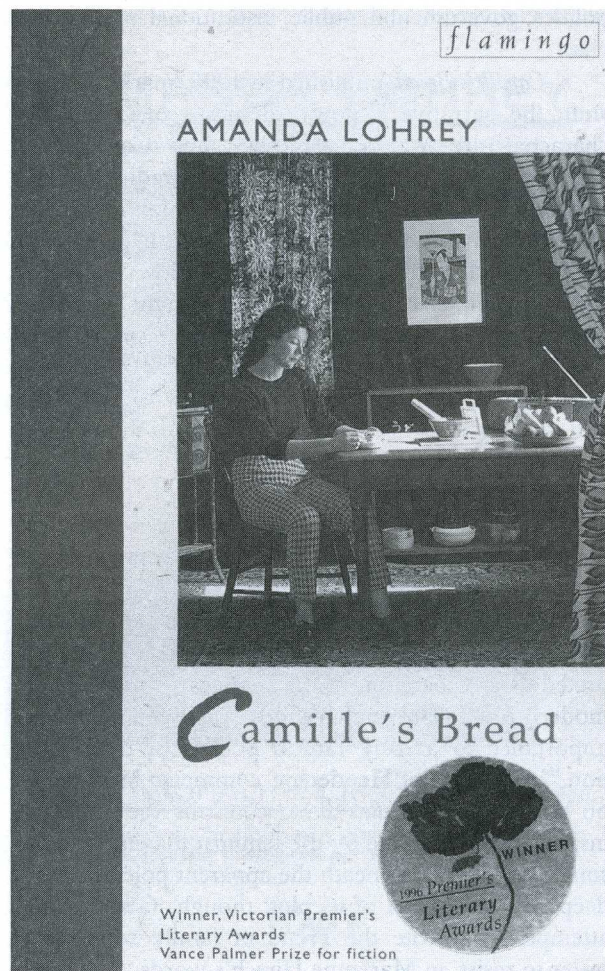
politics: governmental, public, institutional, and patriarchal.

*Camille's Bread*, published in 1995, marks a radical shift: the narrative is now a domestic one; the main characters are Marita, a mother, and Camille, her daughter; events follow the trajectory of individual relationships. This novel is political, but its politics are intimate, personal, and affective. The pragmatic concern with material realities is still felt but now realized in Marita's conflict between her own fraught narcissism and her commitment to her daughter; the contingencies of single parenthood in late-capitalist Sydney; the grinding mismatch between Marita's politics of mothering and the beliefs of her lover, Stephen, whose life is shaped by his apprenticeship in shiatsu. Food becomes a dominant metaphor as Camille's love of white bread, Mars bars, and Marita's offerings of cake vie with Stephen's lovingly prepared tofu and asparagus pie, bancha tea, and soaked kombu.

*Camille's Bread* also marks a shift to Lohrey's version of a feminist project, since the novel may "be interpreted as a recognition of the changes wrought by the modern Australian women's movement and feminism's importance to a truly radical politics of transformation." As Margaret Henderson comments in an article on the novel, "*Camille's Bread* confirms the important insights made possible by the feminist maxim, 'the personal is political.'" Beneath the apparent polemic, at the deep structural level of its plot, though, *Camille's Bread* attempts to rewrite the Freudian family romance in order to resist, in Marianne Hirsch's words, "the mechanisms of masculine desire." Lohrey's own copy of Hirsch's psychoanalytic study of the mother-daughter relationship (now in private hands) is heavily annotated and includes references to *Camille's Bread*, a fact that suggests that she used it both as preparation and as a mode of analysis for writing the novel. In the shape and trajectory of the narrative Lohrey recognizes Hirsch's argument that "the plots and structures of realism, rooted as they are in oedipal forms and preoccupations, rest on and benefit from the erasure, trivialization, or objectification of the mother."

In 1996 *Camille's Bread* was awarded the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal in recognition not only of Lohrey's sustained contribution to Australian literature but also of the particular achievement of this novel in portraying the central structures of feeling within modern Australian urban life. The accompanying citation for the award of this medal acknowledged that *Camille's Bread* invokes the Demeter/Persephone myth to articulate a plot structure that foregrounds the mother/daughter relationship without either erasing the maternal (as in the Freudian family romance) or denying the sexuality of the mother (as for example, Mod-





Front cover for the 1996 paperback edition of Lohrey's 1995 novel about a mother, her daughter, and the mother's lover, in which food becomes a dominant metaphor (Brucoli Clark Layman Archives)

ernist versions of the female *künstlerroman* [artist-novel]). In Lohrey's revised family romance, the daughter (Camille) "oscillates" between a sexualized mother (Marita), a mother disfigured by the cruelties of patriarchy (a bag woman called Estelle), and a masculinized maternity (in Stephen), while the traditional (patriarchal) male, whose casual sexuality colludes in generating the event of the family, hovers on the edges of home. The domestic scene is, literally, a mythic space in which the questions "What is a mother? What is maternal? How can the story of mother and daughter be told?" mobilize a plot to offer a range of competing and conflicting responses drawn from the characters' "real life" stories.

*The Philosopher's Doll* (2004) returns to some of these thematic concerns. Lyndsay Eynon, a philosopher, and his wife, Kirsten, who is a "caseworker in a

detention centre for wayward and abandoned boys," are unable to decide whether to have a baby. The novel follows the trajectory of this decision making shaped by unexpected events (his resistance, her miscarriage, and their divorce), the vagaries of everyday life (his decision to buy a dog), the pitfalls of their jobs (his affair with a student) to their eventual parenthood (in their different ways they both make loving parents). At chapter 17 (out of 20) the narrative shifts from focusing on Lyndsay and Kirsten to Sonia, Lyndsay's former student. The final chapter forms a coda to the novel and signals Lohrey's long-term preoccupation with the mechanics of narrative. *The Philosopher's Doll* offers a precise analysis of the dilemma of fertility, in which a sometimes bleak vision is alleviated only by the advent of children whom it is possible to love.

Running parallel to Lohrey's career as a novelist has been her work in Australian public culture as an essayist and reviewer; thus, the essays are a counterpoint to her fiction writing. The essays typically engage with the nuances of cultural shifts and the intersection of political, social, and economic change. "Gallipoli: Male Innocence as a Marketable Commodity" (1982) provided a critique of the "sentimental nationalism" that followed in the wake of Peter Weir's hortatory 1981 motion picture *Gallipoli*. "Out of the Quicksand: On Writing Nuclear-Age Fiction" (1990) addressed the urgent need for political analysis in Australian writing. "Australia Day" (1994) offered a precise critique of the celebration of nation in the context of the republican debate. "Sexual Harassment and Feminism" (1995) investigated the arguments surrounding a case of sexual harassment that gained national coverage. "Groundswell: The Rise of the Greens" (2002) revisited the subject of an earlier essay ("The Greens: A New Narrative" published in 1990) to provide a definitive and valuable history of the emergence of environmental politics and the Greens Party. "The Clear Voice Suddenly Singing," a novella-length nonfiction piece published in *Secrets* (1997), is slightly different, since it combines a meditation on the value of singing with a study of the experiences of an individual professional singer.

At times the essays have shared some concerns with the novels, but the essay form has allowed Lohrey to be more immediately responsive to cultural debate and change and to engage in different kinds of analysis and argument. These writings have been directly purposive: providing comprehensible and intelligent commentary in the public domain and thus making a singular and significant contribution to genuine public debate in Australia. Lohrey's prose is always poised; the issues, carefully enunciated for the reader; and the ethical judgments, reasonable and, perhaps more crucially, defensible. An admirer of the work of Joan Didion and



Tom Wolfe in particular and investigative journalism in general, Lohrey spent time in the United States (during the late 1980s) only to confirm her belief in the importance of public media. Her essays come from an unshakable belief in the value and power of engaging in public debate and a genuine conviction that being a citizen entails a responsibility toward the political process and the health of the public sphere. Critics can legitimately claim for Lohrey a reinvention and revitalizing of the essay—intellectually rigorous without being academic; sifting together precise languages that include the general reader without condescension; demystifying the tautologies of media-speak to make, for instance, public policy clear; and carefully structured for the accessible publishing outlets of journal and magazine.

As a parallel with the essays, Lohrey has proved herself a careful, judicious, and perceptive reviewer of theater, fiction, nonfiction, and, on one occasion, the verse novel. Like her work as a teacher at the University of Technology, Sydney (1988, 1990–1995), the University of Tasmania (2001), and the University of Queensland (2002–2005), where she has taught textual studies, Australian cultural studies, and creative writing, Lohrey's reviewing speaks to a sophisticated understanding of the multiple and interconnected ways in which writing works to sustain, critique, reflect, and produce a culture. The diversity and generosity in her work are impressive, but, perhaps more importantly, argue for Lohrey as having a more innovative and complex persona as a writer. Her work has no room for the stereotypes—romantic or otherwise—of "The Writer," and, in this way, she makes a contribution to the shape of Australian writing and culture as a community. Lohrey's comments on the material aspect of a writing career—grants, residences, and relationships with pub-

lishers—are clearly presented in the course of an interview with Anne Galligan (1997).

Amanda Lohrey remains a singular writer in the Australian literary community. An apposite analogy is perhaps to say that, like a poet, what the writing offers is a voice—articulate, intelligent, critical, caring, by turns optimistic and misanthropic, unsentimental about the past and courageous about the future. Lohrey's writings treat their political function with seriousness and are uncompromising in holding up a mirror to their own culture. The essays, reviews, and novels all ask the same questions: Is this what you want to be? Is this the way you want to live? Is this what you want to believe in? These questions remain the urgent ones for the times.

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Anne Galligan, "Interview with Amanda Lohrey," *Imago: New Writing*, 9, no. 3 (1997): 26–37.

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- Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989);
- Stephen Knight, "A Writable Future," *Scripsi*, 5 (April 1989): 203–207.

#### Papers:

A collection of Amanda Lohrey's papers is held by the University of New South Wales at Australian Defence Forces Academy.