
Edwina Preston

Creative Diplomacy

On the Perils of Biography

Edwina Preston's biography *Brief Lives: Howard Arkley* was published in 2002 by Duffy and Snellgrove.

For a good decade, my mother (always a big reader) only read biography. It seemed merely an anomaly in her personality: on her bedside table, the hefty stack of impossibly dry, impossibly long hard-cover texts, with the blue Hawthorn City Library stamp repeated along the spine. Page after page, punctuated by no dialogue, offering the typographically wearied eye only an occasional indented quote for respite. It was inconceivable to me that she would choose such books for herself – she was tireless in procuring the best of children's fiction for me.

I did not share my mother's literary tastes. I was a fiction-reader, and I read fiction, not for the light it might shed on my own reality, but for the way it could transport me elsewhere. Biography, I thought, was what people read when their own lives were insufficiently interesting. I dismissed biographers as lesser writers: the worst were muck-rakers, and even those whose endeavours were respectably archival had still a whiff of the parasitic about them.

Then, in June 2000, I was approached by a small Sydney publishing house to write, not a work of fiction, but a biography – of Howard Arkley, technicolour painter of Melbourne's suburbs,

EDWINA PRESTON

subcultural figure of the early 1980s, and best known to the general public as a high-profile heroin statistic. It had been a year since Arkley's death from a heroin overdose, and the process of his artistic enshrinement was actively under way. The value of his paintings had soared. People who had never heard of him before knew his name (if nothing else). The time was ripe for a first posthumous biography.

My deadline for a first draft, the publishers indicated, was six months.

This probably should have struck alarm bells, or at least hastened a moment or two of considered reflection – but in my eagerness, the deadline seemed perfectly achievable. I calculated how many words I could write a day, still leaving time for research and interviews. (A writer friend with a more optimistic view of my abilities assured me I could clock up the requisite 50,000 words in eight weeks.) It didn't seem a problem to me that I was not a writer of biography or a reader of biography. Nor that my experience of the Melbourne art world was confined to the generous free-for-all of an occasional gallery opening. Although I had never met Arkley, and had only the most basic familiarity with his work, virtually every person with whom I spoke regaled me with anecdotes about him. I felt wholly confident that my undergraduate fine arts background would render me capable of some level of intelligence when it came to discussing Arkley's work, and that I had enough first-hand acquaintance with artists to be sympathetic to the trials of an artistic career. In fact, I was convinced (as I still am) that my lack of partiality would be an advantage – being neither an admirer of Arkley's nor a detractor, I brought no personal agenda to the task. I was coming to my subject cold, as many of my readers were likely to, and like them, I had no fixed ideas.

And, at bottom, the commission offered that single thing that all aspiring writers cover: the opportunity to *get published*. My enthusiasm for this aspect of the arrangement overwhelmed my facility for careful, rational evaluation. It did not occur to me, for instance, that fulfilling the publisher's brief (that I write a 'lively, anecdotal' book about Arkley) might leave me open to a whole array of criticism. Nor did it occur to me that I would encounter some very basic practical problems dealing with the Melbourne art world. I banked the first

portion of my advance, and penned a naive, overly personable letter to Alison Burton, Arkley's widow.

Her response came back, faxed, three lines long. Alison Burton informed me she would not assist me; that questions regarding reproduction of Arkley's work could be directed to his gallery; and finally, with a note of disapprobation, that Arkley himself would not have participated in 'a book like this'. I wasn't sure what was meant by 'a book like this', but I felt convinced that I could gain her cooperation if only I persevered. As it turned out, this fax was the only communication I would manage to elicit from her over the next two years, and it was echoed in every response I received from Arkley's friends and associates in the weeks following.

The art-world grapevine preceded me everywhere I went. Even Arkley's art dealer, who had initially been enthusiastic (albeit cautiously), was busy and abrupt when I managed to get her on the phone. When I *was* rewarded with an interview with her, I found myself swiftly reprimanded for my audacity in seeking to write a book about Arkley in the first place, quizzed on my approach and informed that everything I knew and thought so far was wrong, or, most dispiriting of all, was told sadly that I was 'brave', and was 'setting myself up to be shot down'. One might have thought that Arkley was part of an international intelligence ring, rather than the golden boy of art in 1990s Melbourne.

Was it a genuine protectiveness of Howard Arkley which was producing this almost-uniform closing of ranks? When I tentatively canvassed opinions (from my handful of willing interviewees) as to why Arkley's intimates might be so hostile to my book, the response that came back, without hesitation, was: Grief. But there seemed to be something else at work: those few nervous interviewees who gave me a hearing either took the official line on Arkley (which substantially glossed over the events leading up to his heroin overdose) or expressed acute anxiety about 'sticking their necks out'.

Perhaps their suspicion arose from a territorial reflex. *Who* was I and what right did I have to embark on this book? I was not, after all, part of the small tight circle which constitutes the Melbourne art

world, and as an unknown quantity, my intentions were naturally suspect. Although I found myself reiterating my various credentials like a broken-down record-player, the fact was I had no background in art criticism or curating. There were any number of people more qualified than I to write about Arkley.

Or was part of the problem the nature of biography itself? Essentially all biography is invasive of people's privacy – but when a subject's contemporaries are still alive, nursing loves and hurts and slights, it takes something more than a nice phone manner to gain their trust. The conventions of popular biography don't exactly allay the fears of a squeamish interviewee either – the 'true story' biography (paperback, with gold-embossed titles and short chapters) screams promises of scandal, gossip, sensation: very different expectations to those which drew my pragmatic mother to the biography shelves at Hawthorn Library.

Adding another spark to what was already ignitable tinder, my book on Arkley (as I haltingly explained down dismally silent phone lines) was to be short and 'unconventional' in approach. Far from striving for the 'whole truth', the publishers had asked me to concentrate on the 'interesting bits', and emphasised that I should treat my material with the 'eye of a novelist', not that of an art historian. This requirement, along with the coda that I write for a lay audience, cast me firmly into the 'untrustworthy biographers' camp.

On a good day, I found it amusing to be the subject of suspicion and gossip, but the rebuffs didn't do much good for the book or for my confidence. Issues of prose style aside, to write a convincing and balanced biography of anyone, a writer has to enter into some kind of relationship with them, and know them beyond the CV and the press photos. I had a hopeless feeling that I might only be capable of producing a thin little volume titled 'Howard Arkley: Drinking Stories'. I was also starting to feel markedly uncomfortable about the inherently invasive nature of biography-writing: no matter which slant I put on things, this discomfort remained with me.

'Write from material in the public domain,' I was enjoined by the author of the 1997 Arkley monograph *Spray*, after his unsuccessful

attempts to liaise with Alison Burton on my behalf. 'Look at the art,' I was advised by well-meaning collectors. But the art and the art reviews could only tell me so much. As it was, I was being regularly reminded by my publishers that they didn't want an art-heavy account of Arkley's life; they wanted a book which would whet the appetite with tasty morsels, not dull it with dry wholesome facts. (Later, whenever I digressed into art history, my draft would come back scored with long red pen marks.)

Presumably the publisher's rationale was that a lively book about a contemporary artist would reach a larger, more general audience than the standard art-history text. I was at a loss, however, to imagine how I might accumulate the sort of interesting detail my publisher wanted without the participation of Arkley's friends and colleagues. Artists no longer divulged the details of their private and professional lives in correspondence considerably bequeathed to the state. Without these aids, any biography of Arkley was starting to seem impossible – let alone one which treated the material 'unconventionally'.

Could I make an interesting case for Arkley through public documents alone? In the Baillieu library at Melbourne University, after much shelf-searching and placing of holds, I finally got my hands on a copy of *Spray*, the out-of-print monograph on Arkley by Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar. The technicolour flycover had long hit the dust; without it *Spray* was a broad, grey hardback of serious intent. So threadbare and underscored were its pages that it looked like it had undergone a century's hard scholastic reading. Someone, at some stage, had spilt a beverage on it so the lower right-hand corners were puckered, and a correlating swell swept the pages throughout. One might expect this of a seminal text on, say, the Great Masters – Da Vinci, Raphael, Titian. Or on the great Moderns: Warhol, for instance, engenders this kind of intent student readership; Dali's a good undergraduate subject. But Howard Arkley was born in Surrey Hills. In 1951. And the date of the book's publication was not 1973, but 1997. Was it the intense readership of one student, or the general interest of many, which had thus marked an otherwise pristine art book, published in 1997?

Above and beyond its value as a reference, as an object in itself

Spray told me something interesting about Arkley which I might not otherwise have fully appreciated: the extent of his local popularity.

Apart from this revelation, the 'public domain' could offer me little that was not art-specific. I began collating my own inventory of the 'stepping stones' of Arkley's career, but between the important dates and painting titles were conspicuous gaps pertaining to Arkley's personal life. How to fill these without resorting to speculation?

I looked at other art biographies for ideas on how I might tackle the task. On my parent's bookshelf, I accidentally came across *The Gold of their Bodies* by Charles Gorham, a popular 'fabrication' of a famous artist's life. Published in 1955, this book declared itself, on both cover and titlepage, to be 'a novel about Gauguin' and, like a novel, it incorporated plenty of dramatic dialogue in contemporary vernacular, and bawdy scenes which threw light on Gauguin's tortured genius. As a piece of fiction, it wasn't particularly brilliant, but to my mind it performed a valuable service: rather than intimidating a reader with slabs of dry indecipherable artspeak, it presented an artist's life and work in a format which was easily accessible and narratively interesting. It employed the 'novelist's eye' to great effect.

When Gorham wrote this book, several decades had passed since Gauguin's death. Would he have been able to produce the same work if Gauguin were still alive, living in a small rented house around the corner, or only recently deceased and the subject of bitter legal battles? Even the dry, academic biographies my mother read were largely about long-dead people, people whose dust had settled.

But if time bestows a certain creative immunity on writers, it also causes people to forget. Like newspaper editors, publishers have economic imperatives; they want a story when it's still a story. For my purposes, the mark Howard Arkley made on the landscape of Australian art was not going to be measurable for some years – perhaps it would prove to be little more than a faint imprint. Was it my job to attempt some measure of his 'artistic greatness'? My publishers made it fairly clear that it was not.

Apart from the fact of his recent death, I began to wonder why Arkley had been selected as a prospective subject. The other subjects

(in the series of which my book was to be one instalment) were garrulous, opinionated Australians – Bob Ellis and Robert Hughes, Rose Porteous – they were people about whom Australians had strong opinions. If there was any controversy or sensation surrounding Howard Arkley, it could only relate to his heroin use. Otherwise he was (as far as I could make out) almost unanimously loved by the people around him. Still, when I put myself in blurb-writing mode, I could see the basic commodity-shape of his story: Howard Arkley was a painter who lived and worked in Melbourne all his life, suffered the archetypal demons of his vocation, briefly triumphed in the fame lottery, and then died tragically before he fully received his dues. His life certainly contained all the ingredients of the 'true story' biography – seedy lifestyle, tormented psyche, final tragic drug overdose. Throw in a couple of gratuitous mentions of his famous mates in the Melbourne punk scene – Nick Cave, for instance. How *not* to sensationalise such material? Merely to discuss these things, merely to put them down on paper *felt* sensational.

I suspected that my publishers, like me, had only a slim understanding of Arkley when they pencilled his name into their publishing schedule: theirs was an interest fed by the obituaries, and would in turn capitalise on the obituaries. Whether I conceded to it or not, I was an extension of this commercial impulse. It didn't mean my objectives, or my publishers' objectives, were dishonest – but it did affect my ability to present myself as a separate entity: a disinterested writer, whose foot just happened to be yoked to the wheels of the greater machine.

The reservations of Arkley's friends and associates were also understandable in this commercial context. 'The market does not think the only good artist is a dead artist,' wrote Robert Hughes back in 1978, 'but it knows that the best sort of artist is a dead good artist.' Within months of Howard Arkley's death, Hughes's cynicism was proven to be as well-founded as ever. Postmortem exhibitions of the paintings Arkley had shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale (just weeks prior to his death) had contributed to a commercial boom in his work. Recent Arkleys would soon be selling at auction for unheard-of sums (upwards of \$300,000). Naturally, with this type of incentive, lost and forgotten

works began to appear, art dealers began strategically undercutting other art dealers, and on the secondary market, anonymous entities (erstwhile collectors? auction houses?) were making large amounts of money from Arkley's death. In this context, Arkley's estate may have entertained the notion that I and my publishers stood to make an appreciable profit from the small print-run of my slim little paperback.

It became increasingly clear to me that Arkley's estate had not fared well in the post-mortem profiteering. From what I could make out, it seemed that little of his work had actually been in Arkley's possession at the time of his death – the only real avenue through which the Estate might benefit financially from the commercial upturn was in the charging of permissions fees for the reproduction of his work. An article in the *Age* brought this to public attention: when the auction house, Deutscher Menzies, failed to pay a fee of \$5,000 for permission to use an Arkley image on the front of their 2000 Spring auction catalogue, Burton took them to court – and won. Soon after, the Melbourne newspapers reported, she drew up a schedule of fees payable on the reproduction of Arkley works (in books, catalogues etc.), ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars, depending on placement and size.

In theory, there is moral value in the idea that an artist, or his estate, might recoup some of the profits made when a painting is resold at many times its original value. The painting Deutscher Menzies used on its catalogue cover originally sold for \$6,000; it would sell for \$367,000 at the auction in question. But high reproduction fees also make it certain that an artist's work will not be viewed as broadly or as frequently as it might otherwise be. If other artists or dealers are vying for prominent positions in catalogues or magazines, and there are no fees demanded for reproduction, the desire to promote the legacy of a dead artist may be outweighed by economic considerations.

In my view, Alison Burton was exerting a legal and economic right in demanding permissions fees. But for my purposes, her vigilant stance was simply another door closing in my face. She had not responded to my written enquiries about the issue; now I had to assume that the costs associated with reproducing Arkley's work might be prohibitive, particularly for a small independent publishing house.

So here, by default, was the single bit of creative licence I could justify: describing Arkley's paintings to the reader, without reference to any examples.

The widows of successful, celebrated men don't always fare well in the media. But the wife of an artist may have one powerful recourse: control over the use of her deceased husband's images. This may also confer a measure of control over the artist's reputation – how he is portrayed, in what contexts, by which writers, and in which publications. It is for this, the ability to own and control access to the imagery and personal documentation, that artists' wives have become stereotyped as notoriously difficult figures.

Indeed, there is often good reason to be 'difficult'. Art history is strewn with examples of masculine artistic success which depended at least partially on the support, or collusion, of a wife (think: Lee Krasner for the first, Gala Dali for the second). It's not uncommon for artists' wives to perform multiple roles in their capacity as spouses: assistant, business manager, bookkeeper – not to mention nurse and social organiser. Of course, there are many kinds of return built into this arrangement. But when an artist has had several significant women in his life, or his finances were left in disarray and testimonial intentions were unclear, distribution of these returns might become a matter of controversy. Such was the case with Brett Whiteley's 'women' after his death: they ended up fighting it out very publicly in a courtroom. Did the media commentary represent them in a sympathetic light? Not particularly. They just looked greedy.

I was beginning to understand the complexities at work behind Alison Burton's silence.

In October 2000, I received an unexpectedly positive response from Melbourne writer and art historian Janine Burke. I'd written to her because she had been a friend and early champion of Arkley's – unbeknownst to me, in late 2000 she herself was facing what would become a drawn-out battle over copyright issues. Burke was writing a biography of Albert Tucker, who died in 1999, and Barbara Tucker, his widow, was not happy with the draft of the prospective book she had

received. The crux of the problem, it seemed, was the *tone* of Burke's draft and the emphasis she placed on Tucker's earlier work – work he had made under the influence of other people, another wife. The scenario had not yet assumed the magnified proportions it would in months to come; but it was cause for agitation, not only because the withdrawal of Barbara Tucker's approval would bar the reproduction of paintings in Burke's book, but because it would also cut out a slab of important material she had relied on and believed Albert Tucker to have approved the use of: his correspondence. As it turned out, *Australian Gothic: A Life of Albert Tucker* was published early in 2002 *without* reproductions of Tucker's paintings – although Burke was able to reproduce his photographs. His correspondence, meanwhile, had to be paraphrased for inclusion.

In the light of my own difficulties, and the problems Burke went on to encounter, I began to wonder why it was that the validity of the 'authorised' biography didn't come under more scrutiny. This word: 'authorised', when appended to a biography title, usually gives a book an aura of respectability. It says: the book you are about to read has been approved by the people whom it might most hurt; its author has been deemed trustworthy. But perhaps we should be as suspicious of this as we are of the claims which distinguish the popular biography: its promises of 'truth' and 'the full story'. Perhaps the word 'authorised' simply implies greater circumscription on the part of the biographer. Have they been free to consider a range of perspectives in the writing of their book, or have they been constrained by the desires of their primary 'authorising' source? Can your autonomy as a biographer be retained when someone is looking constantly over your shoulder, perhaps even wielding the power to obstruct publication should the book not represent their version of events?

If diplomacy demands that a little creative humouring be undertaken in the course of writing biography – in the way living sources are represented, for example – this is no bad thing, as long as an author doesn't feel his or her work unduly compromised. But if it means holding in check important conclusions, or whitewashing a story until it's a pale reflection of itself, diplomacy is a failed strategy for a biographer. The withdrawal of Barbara Tucker's cooperation may have stripped

Janine Burke of some resources she had relied upon, but it probably gave her greater freedom to reflect on and weigh her material than she would have had as 'authorised' biographer.

In November 2000, I had a stack of photocopied documents and press clippings and about three interview transcripts to make a book out of. I had typed twenty pages of incoherent waffle, in an attempt to find a writing style which was informal, but informative; novelistic, but not sensational; lively, but not cringeworthy. When I began to consider the many various ways in which I would be leaving myself open to criticism, in tackling this material in a way which was outside conventional art scholarship, I felt sick in the stomach.

Amongst other criticisms (including corrections of errors which did not actually appear in the book) John McDonald at the *Sydney Morning Herald* would later describe as 'cloyingly familiar' my use of Arkley's christian name in my book – in fact, I agonised over this simple question of *what to call him*. Calling him 'Howard' felt like a familiarity I had not yet earned. Calling him 'Arkley' felt inappropriately formal. As a measure of how uncomfortable I felt, I referred to him only by his initials. (It wasn't until I'd finished my first draft that I had the confidence to do a Find and Replace on the abbreviation.)

And then, just as I was doubting the ethical foundations of the whole process, cracks began appearing in the brick walls I'd so far encountered. In response to a letter I had written her, I received a phone-call from Gwen Lewis, Howard Arkley's mother. After countless answering-machine messages and wrongly addressed bits of mail, I managed to make contact with Arkley's first and second wives. I received replies from Arkley's friends and colleagues from the 70s and 80s, whose addresses had taken weeks of detective work to locate. I had promising preliminary conversations and encouraging meetings over coffee. I had found a fault line in the otherwise solid edifice of 'Howard Arkley', and as I levered it open, a whole slab of his history was coming loose.

I was relieved and grateful, and I stopped contemplating how I might pay back my publisher's advance. In the weeks which followed, I not only honed my interviewing skills, but managed to amass the

kind of detail – personal, anecdotal, emotional – and different perspectives the book required if it were to have any depth. But as my relationship with Arkley's friends and family progressed, there came certain responsibilities, and in addressing them, I found myself negotiating another obstacle course.

After her first phone call, I found myself in regular communication with Gwen Lewis – who was not only still upset about her son's death, but aggrieved by the Estate's treatment of her in the aftermath. Increasingly in the course of our conversations, I came to feel that my book was the last port of call for Gwen Lewis: a vehicle via which she might find some form of redress. I felt sorry for her. It was not the function of my book to right wrongs, but I felt compelled to incorporate her story.

Rather than fading into the background, my problems with Alison Burton now began to take on another hue. I had to acknowledge that my feelings towards her had changed. Without her side of the story, I was in danger of losing whatever skerrick of impartiality I had left. I wrote to her and let her know that I had spoken to Mrs Lewis, but in the ensuing silence, I was unsure how to proceed.

I knew I had to maintain that aspiration to objectivity which is so necessary to a biographer's reputation, but I already felt emotionally embroiled in Gwen Lewis's predicament. I explained to her that I had to be very diplomatic in the way I discussed her situation in my book, and that I had to be careful to avoid defamation. But any mitigating circumstances I presented met with indignation and disbelief. The situation, as she saw it, was black and white.

There were other areas of Arkley's life which his mother was unwilling to see in shades of grey. First and foremost was his use of drugs. Ideally she did not want this discussed at all – certainly, she refused any suggestion that her son might have been in any way responsible for his own predicament. If Arkley had been a casual, secret user of heroin, if its use had been entirely incidental to his life and career, I might have exercised some discretion on this point. But he had died of a heroin overdose, and the cause of his death had been made widely public. I would have been a tardy and cowardly

biographer to omit the important and constant presence of hard drugs in Arkley's life.

Meanwhile, the editorial policy I had employed with Arkley's friends and associates was creating its own series of minor headaches. My policy had been to allow people who had talked openly with me to look at and amend what I had written about them. This would ensure, on one level, that my notes and transcripts had not produced errors (which invariably they had), that I had not skewed things in my interpretation of what they had told me (which I invariably had), and finally, that they were happy with the way they had been represented. In theory, it was a good policy, but it left room for certain truths to be smoothed over, and it forced me into a precarious balancing act.

Everyone had their version of Howard Arkley, their stories and anecdotes and theories, but more than once the stories contradicted each other. Paying heed to one person's version of events often meant dismissing another's, or incorporating it in a less central way – offending someone because you have concluded another's version of events to be more reliable; putting emphasis on one friendship as having been more influential than another, though both were considerably important; leaving someone else's contribution out entirely simply because they couldn't be contacted. Pressing on me at all times was the sense that the book had to please everyone, that everyone's interests and stories should be accorded equal weight. I felt like the boy in the parable about the boy and the baker: whenever he tried to please one person, he displeased another – there was no practical solution in which everyone's interests could be given primacy.

In the case of Arkley's first wife, Elizabeth Gower, who was a crucial source for me (as well as the supplier of important previously unpublished photographs which I hoped to use) the editorial terrors threatened to become prolonged. She was concerned that she had provided me with more information, and more honest information, than other people had; and she was worried that friends and associates would be critical of how she had framed events, or that she would come across as self-promoting. Her requirement of looking at and editing my drafts meant that some small sentences were rewritten five or six times

to get the emphasis just right. The material began to sound, as my editor pointed out, as though she were sitting at my shoulder, guiding my pen. Finally, a very delicate surgery had to be performed on the passages in question to keep the meticulous sense that Gower required and ensure that the text still read impartially.

Creative diplomacy, was how I came to think of it.

I had a book to write – this was the basic task at hand, but it had become so ensnared with psychological barbed wire that I couldn't begin to extract anything substantial from it. At the core of my task, I knew, was a responsibility to Howard Arkley, and buried somewhere deeper beneath that, a responsibility to myself, but the obligation to the publisher to produce a 'good read', and the obligation to those who did take the time to speak with me to render things from their point of view obfuscated these central responsibilities.

When it came to actually writing a first draft of the book, I couldn't lay down a single word. What were my original grand plans? I looked back to my twenty pages of waffle and found not a publishable sentence. Stylistically, I felt barraged by restrictions. I could not speculate, and I certainly could not fictionalise. I could not concentrate on one aspect of Arkley's life and leave out others, not only because real people, whose information I had relied on, would be hurt by the omission, but because I would certainly come under criticism as being a less-than-competent biographer. At all times, I had to be aware of *not sensationalising* Arkley's story – I had to use a novelist's powers of description, but pull back from actually dramatising the material. This was not creative writing; this was clever synthesis. Creating a smooth read out of hopelessly bumpy, rock-strewn material.

In a state of utter and complete writer's block, I took myself off to the single purveyor of public record I hadn't yet got to: the Coroner's Office.

It seemed somehow not right that I could simply sign an administration book and be privy to the intimate details of a person's death. (And the details of death *are* intimate, in some ways, more intimate than the details of a person's life.) Needless to say, no one I'd talked to previously

had been prepared to discuss Arkley's death with me – I was struck now by how easily available the information had been all along. I took Howard Arkley's file off with me to a small room near the main foyer, feeling how I imagined an investigative journalist might feel: exultant at my success in accessing off-limits information.

It hadn't occurred to me that there would be pictures of the scene of Arkley's death. Ten photos taken by the attending officer, of a middle-aged man in runners, curled over on the floor, along with close-ups of his badly bruised face. Seeing him like this – not staring out, all beard and bright eyes, from some media portrait, but the unwitting recipient of my scrutiny – made me feel a basic compassion for Arkley that no anecdote about his excesses or local celebrity or seedy lifestyle could. I felt slightly ashamed at the way I'd been viewing him: as fodder for my book, the 'subject' of a lightweight exercise in readable biography.

What became clear to me, though, as I looked through the polaroid shots the police officer had taken, disinterestedly, routinely, the same way she photographed any body upon discovery, was that the death of Howard Arkley did not mean more or less than the death of any heroin addict. Or any person. And though Arkley's life contained several salient ingredients my own (fortunately) did not, it was precisely its *localness* – its similarities to my own experience and to the experiences of my next-door neighbours and friends, of anyone who lived in suburban or inner-city Melbourne – which made his story resonate.

In a way, this had been at the centre of Arkley's own artistic project too: many of his paintings were about the inherent worth – or aesthetic parity – of the ordinary Australian suburban experience. His defining philosophy was that *anyone could be an artist*. It occurred to me that I would be doing the best by him by showing that Arkley *wasn't* a prodigy, or a 'Who Weekly' candidate, or an extremist who lived some kind of high life well beyond our pedestrian imaginings.

I came home and arranged my transcripts around me on the table. I was looking now for the incidentals, the unlikely points of connection, the things which would help a reader identify with Arkley and his work,

not the things which would set him apart. My eye caught on an early comment made by Arkley's first wife, Elizabeth Gower. 'I just can't see that anything about our lives was interesting,' she had said, bemused by the prospect that someone might want to write about them. 'It was just very average, really. We worked, and ate, and worked again. It was really just boring a lot of the time.'

To me, what now seemed most poignant about Arkley's life was the very thing which baffled Gower: the basic, at times uneventful story it contained about growing up and living in Melbourne, and trying to be an artist here. It was the local nature of his story which had made the task of writing about him at once so political and so unbearably close-to-the-bone. But it was also the thing which gave his story relevance and meaning – after all, I expected my readership to be largely made up of Melbournians.

If I still hadn't resolved all the stylistic questions pertaining to the book, I had at least determined one thing: if a novelist's eye was to be brought to bear on Arkley's story, it was the eye of the good old-fashioned novelist – the novelist who desired a reader to identify with the main character, who wanted the reader to *care* enough to read on, who might even manufacture the kind of closing moments guaranteed to produce a sigh.

As I knew I would sigh, when those final, uncorrectable, bound and printed copies turned up at my doorstep, and no litigation notice appeared in their wake. Looking at them, glossy paperbacks amongst the bubble wrap and rice puffs, I knew they didn't belong to the stack of heavily annotated hardbacks which had adorned my mother's dressing table, but at the least, I hoped they might broker some common ground between art and life, artist and layperson, local celebrity and next-door neighbour, in the same way Arkley's art had.