

Glimpses of how life is lived

Louise Swinn

The Hunter: And Other Stories of Men

By David Cohen

Transit Lounge, 224pp, \$27.99

When I Saw the Animal: Stories

By Bernard Cohen

UQP, 237pp, \$22.95

We are expected to maintain a socially acceptable amount of fakery. Push it too far and you risk being labelled a freak. Undercook it and you may be considered aloof.

In *Woodcutter*, one of the stories in David Cohen's new collection *The Hunter*, a man is employed to act like a woodcutter whenever the Stringybark Express chugs past. Normally an office worker, he begins to identify with the outdoors role and starts hankering to cut some wood. Pretending to chop wood is fine but, as it turns out, actually chopping wood is a transgression too far.

There are many small transgressions by men on the margins, alone or solitary, in *The Hunter*. Protagonists are often single men, perhaps post-divorce, frequently in drab apartment blocks.

In *Washing Day*, Angus's block is all men, and the solitary bra hanging on the Hills hoist is a question and an attraction, replaced after each short-term loan, one man at a time.

In a different story, set in a different apartment block, an older neighbour takes the rubbish bags out of the bins, removes recyclable items and cleans them. For some residents this is welcome. It starts a discussion on waste reduction. Gradually, the older neighbour has less to do because the residents work harder on their recycling. But our narrator is put out by this meddling. He doesn't like being told how his recycling routine could be better. It becomes a competition he must win.

In *The Archive*, a character no longer remembers the names of people close to him, and he forgets to eat. As in *Lament of a Bus Stop Outside the Benrath Senior Centre*, we glimpse the inner world of someone with dementia, where small things are confusing.

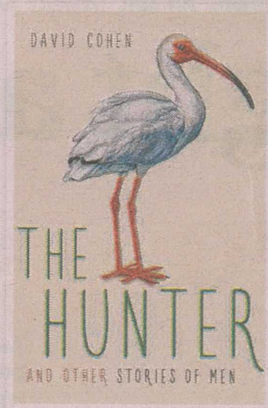
Brisbane-based Cohen is attentive to people who are pushed to the margins. He's interested in male violence, male silence, men who are too loud, men who aren't assertive enough and men in small rebellion at the domestication of their lives.

At a false bus stop, aged-care home resi-

dents wait for a bus that never comes. They wait together and tell stories, and eventually the carers bring them in. This is a conceptually interesting story that is then extrapolated when the bus stop itself feels useless because it's not doing the real job of a bus stop. It has cause to question what else around is fake.

Cohen's humour is understated. In *Frequently Asked Questions*, we find out how a man feels when the cleaning company he no longer works for, the one he and a friend started, goes on to achieve substantial success. Cohen's telling of the story allows for some amusement at the main character's expense, but we are encouraged to relate to him rather than to sit in judgment. Cohen is gentle with his pathetic characters.

A couple of stories are cut short too soon, and it is difficult to extract meaning or entertainment from them. *The Virus*, about a disorder where patients eat themselves to death, has a bit of a naff ending. But endings on stories such as these can be hard and anything too dramatic may seem out of place in Cohen's landscape.



In the opening story, a construction site manager is trying to deal with more than 1000 ibis. People protest against their removal. "They take the line that ibis, although obnoxious at times, has something valuable to contribute to our culture."

But would these same people be happy to have ibis in their own back yards? Cohen's observations about the human condition are wry and topical; they gently encourage, among other things, the consideration of ways to avoid ending up alone.

When I Saw the Animal is a collection of more than 40 stories by Sydney writer Bernard Cohen. The stories vary broadly, from

straightforward or quirky short tales of barely a page, to long ones that require lots of unpacking.

Many are experimental. Some don't so much finish as just stop. Some resemble the results of creative writing class prompts, and perhaps do not achieve everything they are aiming for. But they are never boring and there is delight to be had in reading a book so relentlessly ambitious, one with such a strong sense of play.

The humour is dry and often mischievous: "I'd previously had a rat issue, and occasionally referred to it when a context could be extended to contain rodentism, such as any mention of Norway or feral mammals." Cohen often moves the story forward with an amusing turn of phrase: "He followed a foully content couple through the door." This couple is easy to picture.

Realism sits astride speculative fiction, but most of the time things are awry in numerous small, complicated ways. There are moments of Franz Kafka, moments of Jean-Paul Sartre, and a humorous line in contemporary existentialism prevails. "The city was crowded with fantastically beautiful young people as though for deliberate contrast with the sense of his own decrepitude."

The angle at which Cohen approaches a story allows the reader an unusual entry point, showing perspectives we might otherwise not be afforded. The dialogue replicates the way people talk. Each sentence brings with it a story of its own, and there is a strong sense that there is a lot left unwritten. "Oh, for f.k's sake. How much f.king thoroughness do I need in my life?" He only thought it, but he thought it intensely."

The writing is animated and immediate. From a short observation, we glimpse how a life is being lived. "My wife's mother simply ignored me, or addressed me through her daughter: 'Would he like a cup of coffee? Did he sleep badly?'"

This appears in a painful but droll story about a couple arguing in a restaurant. They are fighting about the meal but their disagreements are about more than the food. Humans behaving badly are seen in direct contrast to the animals depicted. May we all achieve the contentment and quiet introspection of a frog philosopher who muses, "My parents lived on garbage juice ... and they were neither happy nor unhappy."

Louise Swinn is a writer and critic.