

**‘That rarest of things’:
A personal review of *The West in a Nutshell***

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The early years of this decade were, in retrospect, a journalistic golden age for Australia. In the grey pages of the *Financial Review*, through a strange chain of circumstances, something new began appearing: new writing - a set of linked articles: appreciations, literary observations, cultural contentions. Each was distinct, in topic and in argument, yet they were of a piece, they formed a single extended chain of conversation with the reader.

They are collected in the pages of this book: they build into something more than the sum of their parts. Paul Monk is that rarest of things in the Australian landscape: an independent thinker, a man free from institutional or media industry affiliations. He has always been something of a prodigy, in the breadth and sweep of his coverage, in his analytic powers, in his willingness to explore the ideas around him right to their bitter depths.

The temper of his mind is on view here: it is engaged and inquiring, he is convinced the world's mystery must be subjected to constant scrutinizing study - and yet that mystery and beauty remain with him at the end, neither reduced nor subjected to the vulgar schemas of intellectual fashion. Monk's essays range from geopolitical overviews to fine-grained textual readings of the classics; he elucidates the Biblical roots of Leonard Cohen's songs and the strategic lessons left by the Greek historians.

The range is one thing: but the interconnection of the various components is the key. Here is a thinker with a coherent world-view, based in the deep well-springs of Western civilization, yet profoundly engaged with Asian societies: an Australian perspective. In this country's fragmented, archipelagic cultural landscape, where portentous academic pontiffs and popular pamphleteers hold court, Monk stands out as a writer passionately committed to a single, unwavering cause - enlightenment and truth.

He believes we can think our way through the maze, and thought can be aligned with moral judgment. One page of his writing on the vexed questions of

contemporary politics is worth a book by most other commentators. But these essays are not just dry, worthy, exercises of the mind. They are the work of flesh and blood, they have the strangeness of an individual's take on life, an outsider's take.

If Monk were a priest, he would be a Franciscan, not a Jesuit: he regards the world as a thing of beauty, and of fine inter-relations, nets of subtlety to be teased out. There are many delights in *The West in a Nutshell*, but the book itself is its own best ambassador: elegant, dusted with a hint of presentational eccentricity, lovely to hold - in both look and content a source of enlightenment.

Nicolas Rothwell is the award-winning author of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Another Country* and most recently *The Red Highway*. He was born in New York, and was educated in Switzerland, London and Oxford. He has worked as a journalist on newspapers in Sydney, Singapore, London and New York. He spent the 80s and early 90s as a foreign correspondent for *The Australian* in the Americas, the Pacific and Western and Eastern Europe, where he covered the revolutionary upheavals that form the backdrop to his book, *Heaven and Earth*. He is now the northern correspondent for *The Australian*. His new book *The Red Highway* explores death, friendship, travel and art, and evokes a unique and mesmerizing part of the country. He shares his story of a quest.