

**V** IETNAM memories, a literary life and a stint in China contrast pleasantly with two works of fiction this week.

Stuart Rintoul's interviews with Australian veterans in *Ashes of Vietnam* (William Heinemann, 246pp, \$14.95) emphasise political cynicism as well as personal and social disillusionment. There is little trace of idealism or sacrifice in a collection that records the thoughts of men who had been told they were destroying the snake of communism; had been welcomed with stony looks by people they thought they were helping and who were part of destroying villagers who might — or might not — have been Viet Cong sympathisers. The book is most interesting in its revelation of the varying background and outlook of both conscripts and volunteers, and moving in its picture of the men's attempt, often unsuccessful, to live normally after the trauma of war and the social rejection culminating in the moratoria. Some spoke from psychiatric wards, others from the haze of past-obliterating drugs, or from the prospect of death from Agent Orange. There is a certain repetitiveness in their stories, but the layers of detail may be essential to create the cumulative picture of illusion, self-interest or ignorance followed by the reality of physical and mental atrocities, and the final sense of guilt or betrayal after the homecoming. One-sided? Perhaps. Unsettling? Most certainly.

★ ★ ★  
HAL PORTER began his autobiographical trilogy with *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (Faber & Faber, 255pp, \$7.95). It is here that he is at his freshest as he captures the "small cast, few incidents, fewer scenes" that constitute childhood and youth. One is grateful for the reissue of writing with such brilliant control of language and such powerful visual imagination as found in Porter's memoir of unequally loved parents, heedless schooldays and sexual awakening. What distinguishes Porter, apart from his evocation of life in city and country Victoria at the end of the Edwardian era, are his moments of truth about his former not entirely pleasant self. He can be scathing

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## PAPERBACKS

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about the spiritual poverty of his father, critical of "Osstralian" lawdriness and sentimental about the songs his mother taught him; but when regarding his often arrogant and insensitive younger *persona* he is almost bemused. "I can not judge him except to say that, today, I should not like to be him." A classic Australian autobiography, where Porter is at his most disciplined and where there is small room for the racism and sexism that cloud some of his later writing.

★ ★ ★  
IN *Shouting From China* (Penguin, 267pp, \$14.99) Helene Chung, an Australian television journalist, recalls her posting as foreign correspondent in Beijing with a mixture of wry humour and dry analysis. The title captures the technical difficulties in filing her reports as well as the frustration Chung felt with the obstructionism and "layers of Chinese secrecy" that muzzle the foreign press. She describes the contradictions she experienced: the "big pot" that rewards hard and slack workers alike; an open-door policy that seems to be little more than allowing Kentucky Fried Chicken an entrance; Western hypocrisy that turns a blind eye to infringement of human rights; and meeting Ying Ruochens, a star in *The Last Emperor* who welcomes growing cultural freedom. Though Chung's book lacks tightness of structure, and is too close in time to the events she attempted to report, it gives a clear impression of differences in social attitudes, the economic changes even in so short a time as the three years of her stay, as well as of a politically fluid state where campaigns against "spiritual pollution" can be followed by dramatic reversals such as the recent lowering, even further, of the reputation of Mao.

★ ★ ★  
APART from its Alaskan setting there is little of the unusual in *Ice*

*Dancing* (Pandora, 202pp, \$12.95), Amelie La Tourette's first novel, which concerns Chelsea — young, disillusioned and on cocaine — who is thrown among women who have answered an advertisement of bar dancers, couched in deceptively promising terms. From her life-hardened companions she learns the art of being "in one place with your body, but somewhere else in your head." At the same time she has to reflect on her past relationships and finally take responsibility for her own life and realise — without too much difficulty — that there are better things in life than being the cynosure of the eyes of sex-starved working men. Undoubtedly Chelsea has had some hard times in her short life, but the tone of the novel is so deliberately casual and understated that one's reaction to her confusion — partly coke-induced — is very restrained sympathy. At an intellectual level there is admiration for the solidarity of the dancers and Chelsea's growth in self-knowledge; at an emotional level one is left cold.

★ ★ ★  
BERNICE Rubens proves a more engaging writer in *Our Father* (Abacus, 212pp, \$12.95). Things begin with a bang with Veronica Smiles crossing the Sahara Desert, just minding her own business, when she runs into God. The idea of the soul being pursued by the divine is at least as old as St Augustine; but Rubens explores it with humour and insight in her entertaining novel. She makes quite feasible the religious crisis experienced by an agnostic who is forced to reappraise the mistakes and evasions of her past and seriously think about her present lack of direction. By no means a moralising text, this story of a soul's journey has some bizarre and unpredictable moments, not the least being Veronica's seduction of a plumber on the morning of her ill-advised midlife marriage. (So there, God, is her attitude.) The perennial theme of the meaning of existence is approached by Rubens with stylistic elegance and a lightness of touch that invite a deeper reflection. Rubens skims over some big questions with heavenly leagued boots, and with as delightful an impact as the cat in the fable.