The title of this novel, *Shadow Thief*, is well chosen; its symbolic apprehensions resonate throughout the plot on aesthetic, psychological and literal levels. The Jungian shadow of projection persists as Campbell intimately connects the reader with her characters’ view of others. At the centre, the actual story of the shadows looms large where it seems that the mother has stolen the energy and creative spirit of the daughter, and the shadow of literary theory or literature itself enters as a presence in the construction and ontology of the characters themselves.

This is a complex novel — one that grows in stature with the second read. It’s not that the first read is un-pleasurable or without a sense of adventure, but rather that this novel commands the kind of attention to detail that blocks initial understanding. It is only at the end of the book when you see the pieces come together that you become intrigued and return immediately to the beginning. Of course this is only the view of one reader and it may very well be different for others, but for me the second reading was an empowered one that facilitated an appreciation of the full scope of Campbell’s intellectual vision. Furthermore, Campbell excels in her creation of time and place and it was with a great deal of pleasure that I followed the journey once more, stopping to re-read her poetic coupling of weather conditions and character types, re-treading the dance of dialogue, and simply believing in the places that make up the narrative.

Re-experienced on the second reading, the two opening chapters demonstrate the complexity of the text. Within them a psychological
and theoretical framework is established which can only be recognised by knowing the work as a whole. A novel or a painting or any other form of art that challenges the reader and demands a return is one that has a depth of purpose and creates a firework that offers multiple pathways of investigation. Chapter One, “Usually always”, presents Alison, daughter of Rose; Chapter Two “The Daughter of Goodness” presents Dianne, daughter of Nancy. The set for mother/daughter relationships is framed, and I would suspect that all that we learn about Alison and Rose, and the relationship that forms between them, is signalled in these early chapters. Rose is vague and preoccupied with a large loss; she smokes ceaselessly even while she casually attends to Alison’s asthma; she barely notices that her daughter saves her brother’s life and, at least from Alison’s perspective, she is the source of Alison’s anger and someone who warrants blame.

Dianne, on the other hand, has a mother, Nancy, who specialises in damning and categorising others. She has names for everyone in the neighbourhood — nasty names that forgive little and which serve to dictate the behaviour of others. Dianne is repulsed by her mother and shows it, unlike Alison, who locks her resentment within. Dianne is all about “becoming” in that Deleuzian sense that Campbell draws on with some humour (she apologises for the game-play in her preface). Dianne will be the explosive member of the coupling for which these two are destined.

In the beginning, Dianne is impatient with the warm-bloodedness of people’s prose and life. There was a burning story within her and

Her words were still there, pulsing too big in her throat, pushing to break out of her mouth, putting out stems and leaves and thorns in a thicket that would choke her, a tangle she couldn’t follow even with her mind’s eye, and, in the dank dark dreaming part of her brain, there was a hairy mesh of roots drawing on hot compost [13].

The rest of the novel traces her “becoming”; we meet her early first love and learn the costs of her intensity; Jungian shadows are played out against the others that reflect that which she won’t quite admit about herself. Her meeting with Alison, her teacher in prison, provides
other literary shadows to function successfully as a means of enacting her “becoming”. Alison, however, emerges from another set of shadows. She lives with the knowledge that her mother is a thief—a thief of her story about shadows that Rose had overheard Alison tell her younger brother. The discovery that this mother could do this to Alison is a blow that makes her wonder:

Maybe if you wanted to keep your story, it was like the White Knight’s white horse, which you kept precious and alone in your head while your teeth struck through the chocolate to the peppermint; you didn’t let it out; you kept it tearing at the grass, swishing its tail, in that tiny safe place, in the green clearing in the furthest, secretest space of yourself [23].

The richness of the text is found not only in Campbell’s persuasive celebration of women who love women but also in the manner in which it reflects a particular period in Australian history. People who remember first-hand the social relations and cultural activities, especially if they were in their early teenage years of that period, or the people from the following generation who know simply by listening to their parents, will relish the cultural environment peppered with objects and fashions that have long receded from our society. It is not merely the names and significance of these objects that hold within them memories of spaces and relationships, but the fact that they remind us of the places we have chosen to leave behind but nevertheless speak to us in buried desires and regrets.

And so one may recall a parent who incessantly smoked such cigarettes as “red Capstans”, the long summer nights when billy-carts were as popular as roller blades have been in recent times, and lolly shops where such treats as musk sticks, freckles and milk bottles were lined up in jars and bought with large copper pennies or with shillings if one was flush in the financial arena. The fashion stakes are a joy to behold as one follows the journey of the protagonists, struggling with their emerging sexuality and rigid, societal measures of success. Bermuda Shorts! Beige lip-stick and roman sandals tied provocatively up the legs in criss-cross style and desirable, young men
wearing black suede desert boots and tight jeans. Could television really have been “black and white”, and was it watched seated on Axminster carpets? Have you thought of 77 Sunset Strip since? Those hot days of summer, unlike today, were characterised by being burnt; evenings involved the skin being plastered with Johnson’s oil and, of course, wide smiles were compared with those of Efrem Zimbalist Jr. When was the last time you remembered the bonfires which were at every corner paddock or oval on Guy Fawkes Night, the “double bangers”, “jumping jacks”, and “catherine wheels” saved over the preceding weeks finally exploding into the air? Campbell encapsulates this age in many different ways, managing to invoke the Cold War with a quirky phrase that mentions the fear or expectation of “Russia bombing Sydney” or the rigid social laws that made it easy to identify the “uneducated”, the “uncultured”, or perhaps “the working class”, who actually called “dinner” “tea”. There is a shimmering of such objects and phrases that trigger not only the objects themselves, but also hidden narratives that re-surface with all their accompanying shadows, smells and emotions.

Parents do not fare well in this text. Mothers are deemed wanting, hypercritical, controlling and self-absorbed. Fathers are generally weak, as most men in the book are and perhaps there is a disproportionate number of them who are involved in sexual abuse (however nebulous) of their children, other people’s children or their partners. Or perhaps not – the two protagonists who find a liberation of a kind in each other have particular backgrounds that feed and form their strengths and weaknesses.

Marion Campbell has written a lively story that on one level delicately explores the sexual attraction between women. She does this with a keen sense of the environment in which these girls, and later women, struggle towards a sense of self. Campbell is particularly astute at representing the psychological games people play in relationships, picking up on the extent to which personal esteem and fear of rejection create a self-consciousness that is expressed in speech and body language. She is a keen observer of the way in which there always seems to be a gap, both with trivial goals or grand ideals, between aspiration and fulfilment. But she favours the narrative in which the
protagonists are driven by questions concerning the meaning of this world and the part they should play in it. Campbell is succinct in her choice of targets, whether they are weak men, vain men, control freaks (male and female), class snobbery or the limitations of laws and moral codes that exude from institutions and a hierarchical class system. There is no doubt that she has a kind of mission in this book, yet it is delivered lightly, with humour and philosophical insights that make this a book that I shall return to yet again.