Cusack is the dominant character, stricken with multiple sclerosis (“dog’s disease”, she reckoned), radical in politics, unconventional in her choice of extramarital partnership, witty and indefatigably industrious. She is one of the bravest figures in the national literature.

North re-creates the struggles of Cusack and James, and of their older friend Franklin, in a book that she wishes to have “the narrative flow of a novel”. It is an avowedly “hybrid approach” that draws on the three main characters’ letters, poems, novels and memoirs.

There is correspondence from other figures as well; for instance, Kay Keen, whose suffering from tuberculosis inspired Cusack’s novel Say No to Death, Katharine Prichard, novelist and intransigent supporter of communism; and various evasive Australian and European publishers.

Cusack fought long battles with the latter over royalties and content. She opposed the dismissive terms imposed on colonial authors on the one hand, attempts at censorship on the other. These wearying contexts occupy a good deal of North’s book, as it deals acutely with the manifold business associated with writing, the need for cunning as well as craft.

North interpolates shrewd bridging passages throughout Yarn Spinners and the book is amply illustrated with photographs of the authors and places they lived, book covers, press clippings and ASIO file notes on Cusack and her lover, later husband, communist journalist Norman Freehill. The striking endpapers are from Anthony Hordern’s Guide to Sydney.

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Even Cusack’s normally unwavering affection was tested when — without telling them — Franklin entered a manuscript for The Daily Telegraph novel competition. She wrote to James: “Sometimes I feel that Miles is a complete stranger — There must be something in her deeply hurt to make her do these secret, silly things.” The problem was that Franklin knew Cusack and James, under the pseudonym Sydney Wyborne (from their respective birthplaces: West Wyalong and Gisborne in New Zealand), had also entered a manuscript. Not without travail, that became Come in Spinner, written while they shared a house from 1947 to 1949 at Pinegrove in the Blue Mountains.

The novel is set in the Hotel South Pacific in Macquarie Street during one week in October 1944, with a cast of hairdressers, barmaids, prostitutes and US servicemen. The editor of The Daily Telegraph was Brian Penton, who had made a pass at Cusack 10 years before on his return from observing the Spanish Civil War. She reflected that he was “all Basque beret, bullfighting, Ernest Hemingway and Latin love”.

The longer her identity could be concealed the better. The story that North artfully compiles is of the encounter with Miles Franklin that led to their collaboration, Cusack wrote that “meeting you was one of the happiest accidents of 1938”. The book that resulted was Pioneers on Parade, a mockery of the sesquicentenary celebrations that outraged establishment figures who detected themselves within it.

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Franklin’s last letter to Cusack, on August 18, 1954, was “written in pencil, in a shaky, failing hand”. News of her death reached Cusack and James abroad. The “brilliant career” of her sardonically titled first novel was over. Franklin’s correspondents had decades to live before eventually coming home to Australia.

Evidently North will have much more to say of Cusack at least, but for the moment *Yarn Spinners* (replete with 150 pages of chronology, cameos, sources and footnotes with commentary) is a splendid and self-sufficient work.

Here are illuminated the many demands on women: care of ailing relatives (for Franklin), an affair with Xavier Herbert (Cusack), the risks of unconventional sexual and political behaviour, the struggle (in these three instances) to be published. Each woman chose independence on her own difficult terms.

All tested at length and plumbed the ambivalence of expatriate life. North has done them ample justice.

*Peter Pierce edited The Cambridge History of Australian Literature.*

*Yarn Spinners* By Marilla North

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