A Short Note on Grunge Fiction
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Opening Remarks at the Wetness and Odour Panel, Brisbane Writers Festival 1996.

Two months on from Venero Armanno coming up with the title Wetness and Odour, I am less than certain what this panel is meant to be about. Some things I know. Wetness & Odour is one of the few session titles to prompt any significant negative response. We have had a number of telephone complaints to the festival office about the overall changed—perhaps lowered—tone of the event. But only this panel and the one that follows it—Women/Love/Sex—have brought forth complaints of filth and gratuitousness. In fact, the title Filth and Gratuitousness would have suited me fine as an alternative here. It would have been in keeping with many people’s view of grunge fiction.

The term, Grunge, itself remains opaque. It has no transparent meaning. It, of course, springs from the music industry in the late 80’s and early 90’s—the Seattle bands—but has been taken up more widely. It also links to a 70’s retro-fashion moment and the “slacker generation”, but today we wrestle with the question of what it means in contemporary writing and publishing. It stands for something, but for what?

Perhaps the first thing to note about its literary application is that the term is more used outside the industry than within. I do not know many, or any, writers who would put up their hand and volunteer it as a label for their work. It is a media handle above all else. Yet, there does seem to be a recent body of work
than can be identified in its embrace of shared elements: youth culture, urban lifestyle, writing on the body and on bodily functions. For the prurient, and I will confess to be among their immodest number, it seems to be about nothing but sex. But it also links to Bill Buford’s dirty realists, to the American Beats, and to a wave of new writing about youthful self-discovery through dissipation.

So Grunge is a broad church, and it need be to embrace the diversity of three writers on today’s panel: Edward Berridge; Richard King; and Graeme Aitken.

These opening remarks are a ludicrously inadequate introduction to Grunge Fiction or Grunge Lit, as it was often called in the Australian context. I am not sure what happened to the rest. My memory of this panel is somewhat eroded by time and by the fact that later that day I had to be taken home from the festival in blithering state and put to bed. But in retrospect, King and Aitken sit awkwardly here—it was probably bad programming on my part. And neither of the major grunge writers, Andrew McGahan (gotta love that dreamboat photo) or Justine Ettler, were on the program. Edward Berridge could be described in many ways: grunge, literature of the abject, dirty realist, an anti-eroticist. Anyway, he gave a reading from a work in progress at some point at this festival. The material was so devastatingly difficult—unlovable, vile, coarse, discomforting—that it seemed to end his career there and then before our squinting eyes.