

**Xavier Pons. *Messengers of Eros: Representations of Sex in Australian Writing*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, 361pp.  
AU\$ 44.95  
ISBN: 1 4438 0523 8 (pbk)**

From early convict narratives to contemporary literary fiction, Australian writers have consistently represented a diverse range of sexual behaviours, scenarios, desires and identities. Notwithstanding such an intriguing and bountiful array of sexual narratives and a rather sophisticated range of analytical approaches made available by psychoanalytic, postmodern, feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship, Australian literary critics have been relatively silent or perhaps even coy when it comes to thinking about sex. Back in 1998, Dean Kiley chastised 'OzLitCriture' for its reluctance to adequately address the queerness of Australian literature:

Despite the gloriously disproportionate over-representation of queer writers and writing in whatever you might call an OzLit canon, the cybernetic industry of Australian Literature and its critical machinery (OzLitCriture for short) continues to occlude, defuse, diffuse, evade and domesticate queer issues.

In the years since Kiley's critique a body of work about Australian literature and sexuality has developed but book-length studies have failed to emerge. In this sense Xavier Pons' *Messengers of Eros* can claim the title of being the first full length critical study of the representations of sex in Australian literature.

Xavier Pons has been contributing to Australian literary studies, and been one of its chief proponents in Europe, since the late 1960s. Pons has published on an extensive range of Australian authors and themes and is perhaps best known for his critical study on the work of Henry Lawson, *Out of Eden* (1984). Pons, who teaches Australian Studies at the University of Toulouse, has also translated Australian novels into French, notably Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage* (1983) and Peter Carey's *Bliss* (1981). Pons' new monograph begins with three introductory survey chapters followed by a further thirteen chapters of close readings of individual texts and authors. Of these sixteen chapters, four have previously been published in journals: on Beverly Farmer's *The Seal Woman* (1994), A. D. Hope's poetry (2000), Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded* (2003) and Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* together with Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2006). Of these republished chapters only the early essay on Farmer's work has been rewritten and extended. Taken together, these chapters illustrate, and in a sense showcase, Pons' developing critical interest throughout the 1990s and 2000s in the erotics of Australian literature. Pons builds on this interest by offering new chapters on Carey and Tsiolkas, Malouf, Katharine Susannah Pritchard's *Coonardoo* (1929), Asian-Australian and Greek-Australian writing and in the chapter titled 'The Joys of Irresponsible Sex' examines the neglected Norman Lindsay novel *Redheap* (1930).

The first three chapters—'Comings and Goings', 'Reservoirs of Desire' and 'Transgressions'—flesh out Pons' working definitions of desire, eroticism, sex and sexuality with examples from an array of Australian literary texts. These chapters competently foreground a broadly psychoanalytic and postmodern theoretical approach that explores some of the vexed issues surrounding the representation of sex: such as the pornographic/erotic divide, censorship, sexual violence and differing notions of transgression. However, Pons' introductory chapters do not seem to offer anything especially new on the topic. For example, the juxtaposition of

Amy Witting's *I for Isobel* (1990) with Peter Goldsworthy's *Maestro* (1989) or John A Scott's *What I Have Written* (1994) creates interesting erotic parallels and contrasts, but Pons' analysis does little to develop such links. Rather, the literary texts cited in these early chapters perform a basic role of illustrating Pons' general points about the topos of sex. Despite mobilising the theories of European figures like Bataille, Foucault, Kristeva and Cixous, Pons exhibits a reluctance to use important US-based queer theorists, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. When Pons does utilise different theoretical approaches they tend to sit rather awkwardly in his analysis. For example, a lot of time and space is spent recapping the postcolonial thinking of Edward Said, but little space devoted to applying such approaches to Australian texts, while at the same time ignoring scholarship that has already applied these theories most notably Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's *Dark Side of the Dream* (which is listed in Pons' bibliography).

On the back cover blurb we are lead to believe that Pons' critical study will discuss in some detail the works of Patrick White and Joseph Furphy's classic novel *Such is Life* (1903). This is a misnomer. In a 361 page tome White gets only four brief lines that make a rather trite reference to Eddie's cross-dressing in *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). Furphy does a little better with two paragraphs. In his revised Chapter Nine on Beverly Farmer and *écriture féminine*, Pons introduces Furphy as a 'the almost quintessentially male Australian author' (192) and then proceeds to juxtapose his discussion of Farmer with a rather awkward detour on Furphy's 'consistent male chauvinism' and 'masculine quality'. Pons also includes some rather odd personal references in his analysis such as 'I think [*Such is Life* can] be regarded as thoroughly masculine, enjoyable only to unredeemable male chauvinists such as myself' (192). In particular, Pons reads Furphy's famous moustachioed Riverina women as a sign of Australians sexual coarseness and male chauvinism, when in fact Furphy's novel has been shown to offer a complex understanding of sexuality that presents Furphy's moustachioed women—such as Nosey Alf—as ambiguous and potentially disruptive to gender norms. Seminal scholarship on Furphy by Australian feminist literary critics such as Susan Lever and Susan K. Martin, or even earlier foundational studies by John Barnes and Julian Croft, are absent.

In Pons' chapter on homoeroticism in the fiction of David Malouf he covers a wide selection of Malouf's *oeuvre* in order to make a cogent case for their homoerotic content. However, this new chapter again fails to engage with critical work on Malouf and (homo)sexuality: a shortlist would include Stephen Kirby's seminal 1987 *Meanjin* essay, Leigh Dale and Helen Gilbert's reading of *Blood Relations* and though Ivor Indyk's landmark monograph is briefly quoted it is not in relation to Indyk's readings of Malouf's homoeroticism. This tendency of Pons to operate in a critical vacuum is also evident in his chapters on Christos Tsiolkas' novels. Tsiolkas is by far the most discussed author in Pons' book which does seem to reflect current trends in Australian literary criticism with *Dead Europe* (2005), for example, receiving a vast amount of critical attention in its short life. Chapter 13 reads Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* (1991) with (within and against) *Dead Europe*. These are two writers and novels not often thought of or read together. This is where Pons' analysis becomes interesting and offers something new in the way of a critical perspective, in this instance, on the representation of 'object eroticism' in the two novels.

*Messengers of Eros* covers a commendably wide range of Australian literary texts; sometimes this creates fascinating thematic links and juxtapositions, but conversely some of these tantalising couplings and groupings are not really examined in any detail. Nevertheless, Pons does offer some valuable criticism on authors and texts that have been relatively neglected by

Australian literary critics: namely Frank Moorhouse, John A. Scott, Linda Jaivin, Fiona McGregor, Simone Lazaroo, Hsu-Ming Teo, and novels like Nikos Athanasou's *Hybrids* (1995) and Lillian Ng's *Swallowing Clouds* (1997). Pons study provides two chapters that explore the representations of Aborigines and sex. The first chapter 'The Great Dirty Joke Black Velvet' examines miscegenation as an unspoken theme of Australian literature, focusing on two classics: Katherine Susannah Pritchard's *Coonardoo* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938). Chapter 16, 'Blackfella Loving', is concerned with indigenous representations of their own sexual cultures with a specific focus on Aboriginal men's violence against women. The chapter includes sustained discussion on the writings of Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko, Mudrooroo, Archie Weller and Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990). Pons' analysis of indigenous texts would have benefited from a critical engagement with leading scholars in the field such as the work of Marcia Langton, Penny Van Toorn or Alison Ravenscroft to name but a few. Perhaps these two chapters would have been more successful if they were placed in direct dialogue with each other, creating a more interesting contextualised and contested terrain of indigenous texts and representations of sex.

Pons' conclusion is a bit dubious at times and fraught by vague generalisations, for example: 'it could be argued that Australia's literary treatment of sex has been somewhat lacking in refinement, somewhat inclined to coarseness' (344). It could also be argued that Pons' conclusion about this trait of sexual 'coarseness' becomes self-evident by the choice of texts discussed. Notably missing from Pons' analysis is any real engagement or even coverage of gay and lesbian writings. Such claims of 'coarseness' and a 'lack of refinement' would be hard to make in light of Mary Fallon's award-winning *Working Hot* (1989) with its sophisticated representations of lesbian sexual desire and feminism. Pons's lengthy study makes no reference to the work of such prominent queer literary figures as Dorothy Porter or Hal Porter, Robert Dessaix's eloquent and erudite erotic explorations only rate a brief quote, while Henry Handel Richardson's groundbreaking representations of same-sex female desire in her short stories and the fascinating negotiations of sex, gender and desire in the novels of Eve Langley (aka Oscar Wilde via deed poll in 1955) are overlooked.

Another problematic issue with Pons's conclusion is his suggestion that Australian literature has a distinct 'Australian response' to sex; namely a 'sense of dissatisfaction' and 'emphasiz[ing] the bitter at the expense of the sweet' (350). But this distinction is created by contrasting Australian writing with European traditions, rather than say English, American, Canadian or even South African writing. I would argue that a lot of the Australian 'messengers of Eros' Pons explores could just as easily have sent their missives from Canada, New Zealand, the US or UK. This is not to suggest that a European critical framework is not valuable to the study of Australian literature, but that claims of distinctness or Australianness seem a bit hollow without a more thorough contextualising with comparable literary histories.

Pons' thematic focus on the writing of sex and desire in the antipodes is a refreshing and important project to undertake. A book-length critical study of Australian literary representations of sexuality is long overdue. It is also commendable that a European publisher has invested in such a project and conversely an indictment of their Australian counterparts. But unfortunately Pons' work does not quite fill this critical gap. Ultimately, Pons' study reads as a disparate uneven collection of essays that weave in and out of critical focus. Eros becomes a loose, vague and almost meaningless concept used to tie together the individual essays and readings. Pons' *Messengers of Eros* wants to begin a conversation about Australian literature and sex that is already well advanced, and far more nuanced, than his belated contribution.

*Damien Barlow, La Trobe University*

**WORK CITED**

Kiley, Dean. 'Un-Queer Anti Theory'. *Australian Humanities Review*. February (1998): <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archives/Issue-February-1998/Kiley.html>. Accessed 31st September 2011.