

World Readers: the Transnational Locations of Australian Literature

Brigitta Olubas and Tony Simoes da Silva

This issue opens with an important collection of writings on acclaimed novelist Alexis Wright. In ‘The Injusticeable and the Imaginable’ Philip Mead aims to provide a deep context for Wright’s most recent work in terms of her engagement with questions of sovereignty. Mead takes up Wright’s claim that ‘The art of storytelling [...] is a form of activism that allows us to work with our ideas through our imagination’ and through this lens tracks the conceptual paths through which Aboriginal sovereignty becomes imaginable. In ‘Orality and Narrative Invention in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*,’ Geoff Rodoreda argues that the novel’s ‘narrative framework may well be a unique novelistic invention.’ Focusing on Wright’s use of voice in the novel, Rodoreda proposes that ‘*Carpentaria* ... flatly rejects this paradigm of the inevitable demise of the oral upon contact with the written. What Alexis Wright does in her text is to take orality by the scruff of the neck, as it were, shake it free of all of its pejoratives and sneering deprecations, and boldly insert it back into the text, empowered.’ For Rodoreda, orality enables Wright to challenge the predominant role of written narrative in postcolonial settings, and ‘to portray a sovereign Aboriginal mindset in an authentically Indigenous storytelling mode.’

Osborne and Whitlock provide a very different context for Wright’s work through a study of the material and textual forms of *Carpentaria*, from digital resources such as yasiv.com and the Austlit Black Words database, through editorial and marketing history, to a series of paratexts and peritexts. Their discussion yields fascinating insight into the circuits through which local texts reach, if they do, their global readers. Demelza Hall’s interview with Sylvie Kandé, the Franco-Senegalese translator of Alexis Wright’s 2002 collection of stories and literary extracts, *Le Pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*, provides an account of one specific transmission of Wright’s work into the world. Kandé’s re-tracing of the process by which she first read Wright, her reflections on the language of the text (not published in this form in English) and the connections she traces with other global literature – Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, William Faulkner – generate rich new insights into the larger body of work.

This attention to the complex interaction between text, readers and interpretative frameworks of Wright’s work also inflects Maggie Nolan’s exploration of what might be described as the lay reader’s responses to the work of literature. Drawing on research undertaken with two Brisbane-based book clubs and a third one in Melbourne, Nolan asserts that ‘book club readings, in their tentative and open-ended uncertainty, pose a challenge to the orthodoxies of Australian literary studies, and provide a model for reader engagement outside the confines of the academy.’ Noting that book club members rarely concern themselves with postcolonial literary theories, for example, Nolan examines instead the different levels at which such readerships enter the text, as it were. Nolan concludes that book clubs offer neither superior nor inferior reading models, but rather that they enable different reading practices, set in and articulated from diverse locations. Significantly, too, they bring into freer play gender and class ideologies much more likely to be tamed within the critical setting of the academic.

In ‘Disturbance of the White Man: Oriental Quests and Alternative Heroines in Merlinda Bobis’s *Fish-Hair Woman*’ sets out to examine how diasporic Asian writers take up the challenge of negotiating already inherently unstable positions as national and diasporic

subjects. Focusing on Bobis' most recent novel, Zong reads its 'self-conscious deployment of exoticism' to argue that 'In working the "transnational imaginary" into her works as a way of expressing Asian Australian literature, Bobis has manifested how exoticism can be strategically redeployed to present a multiplicity of voices and reflect back to Australians the ways that they have never seen themselves.' Indeed, for Zong a 'peripheral position,' both within and without the nation, both national and diasporic, offers the Asian Australian writer a distinct viewpoint.

In his analysis of Nancy Cato's *Brown Sugar* (1974), Giovanni Messina makes a similar case with reference to Cato's own position as a white Australian and as a woman writer. Messina's essay offers an engaging take on the way the novel stages a process that both complicates the meanings of the Australian nation and complements them. In *Brown Sugar*, Messina argues, Cato sets up that most traditional ritual in traditional Australia, tea drinking in order to debunk its cultural (ideological) value and to critique the multilayered discourses of marginalization and oppression that it embodied. He concludes: 'In this way, acts of memory, of recognition speak against the socialised forms of forgetting, as in the case of the novel here analysed, which can be considered as a "place of memory," unveiling the tyranny of language with its representational power, redrafting history.' Cato, like Bobis, offers up to Australia and Australians a view of themselves they may not immediately recognise.

Autumn Royal's discussion of Dorothy Porter's *Wild Surmise* (2002) seeks to show 'the ways in which Porter poetically explores unfulfilled desire, loss and mourning.' Placing the work as a postmodern elegy, Royal reads it as a means of expanding on the 'understanding of the elegiac mode.' Through a close reading of selected poems, Royal returns to a writer whose work took on narrative conventions with vigor and verve. Paul Eggert's 'Charles Harpur: The Editorial Nightmare' provides a detailed account of the bibliographic and editorial complexities surrounding the oeuvre of 'Australia's most significant colonial poet.' The essay provides a welcome introduction to Eggert's larger project, The Charles Harpur Critical Archive.

This issue also includes Stephen Knight's 'Peter Temple's *Truth*: "the liquid city, the uncertain horizon"' JASAL's first commissioned essay for the Copyright Agency's Reading Australia project. The aim of this project is to provide scholarly, peer-reviewed essays on major Australian texts for tertiary students, following on from but quite distinct from the Reading Australia project to provide resources on Australian texts for secondary and primary school teachers.¹ Knight provides a detailed account of Temple's place within the tradition of Australian crime writing and then focuses on the multiple ways in which the concept of Truth plays out across the novel, including an attentive discussion of Temple's style, and the ways that his work moves in and around its generic contexts.

¹ <<http://readingaustralia.com.au/>> The list of texts covered in secondary and tertiary lists has been developed in consultation with ASAL. JASAL is pleased to be working with the journals *Southerly* and *Westerly* to publish the first 20 peer-reviewed essays in the tertiary series.