

Two Biographies of Frank Moorhouse

Catharine Lumby. *Frank Moorhouse: A Life*. Allen & Unwin, 2023. 304 pages. AU\$34.99 ISBN 9781742372242 (Paperback)

Matthew Lamb. *Frank Moorhouse: Strange Paths*. Penguin, 2023. 480 pages. AU\$45.00 ISBN 9780143786122 (Hardback)

Though less celebrated beyond his country's borders than contemporaries such as Murray Bail and Peter Carey, Frank Moorhouse is arguably one of the major Australian writers of the late twentieth century. His career had several peaks, but his reputation was cemented by the lauded second volume of his League of Nations books, *Dark Palace*, which appeared at the *fin de siècle*. Alongside the novels he published numerous works of prose fiction in discontinuous narrative mode, as well as journalism, criticism and memoir. Through activism over censorship, copyright and state surveillance, he also helped to shape literary authorship as a social and political category in the Australian context. Across all of this work, he was frank in interrogating social, cultural and political phenomena and in examining the self—in both biographical and phenomenological senses—even where some indirectness remained around particular questions of identification.

Despite his prominence, critical and scholarly interest in Moorhouse's work has been inconsistent; at the time of his passing in 2022, Moorhouse scholarship remained sporadic, and no book-length critical treatment yet existed. Though neither is presented as a work of literary studies, two biographies published in late 2023 may draw renewed scholarly attention to this significant, if paradoxical, figure of Australian letters. These biographies—Catharine Lumby's *Frank Moorhouse: A Life* and Matthew Lamb's *Frank Moorhouse: Strange Paths*—present a Moorhouse who eludes any straightforward characterisation.

In both books, we find a Moorhouse who is paradoxical in at least two senses: he and his work are full of enriching contradiction, often only apparent within a broader biographical (and bibliographical) frame; his career and ideas were frequently against *doxa*, testing the limits of public opinion—even (and importantly) when they appeared most timely, topical, or of their moment. Depending on how we read his life and work (Lumby and Lamb give variations), we may also note some further paradoxical qualities: Moorhouse was at once a great proponent of an Australian (settler) literary tradition derived from an oral culture, and its self-aware deconstructor; he was often read as straight (or closeted) but is among the most explicitly (if not avowedly) queer Australian writers to receive the level of public and critical attention he did; and as a counter-cultural figure in both action and reputation, he was also a voluble critic of both bohemia and radical politics in their mid-century Australian manifestations.

These contradictory qualities yield a series of dialectical pathways through his life and work, each traced in a distinct way by Moorhouse's biographers. Lumby frames her book as partial, an insider's account, written by a friend of the subject, skirting authorised status; it is offered as discreet and personal, "a life." Lamb offers a more firmly periodised account, ending in 1974 with Moorhouse in a still-precarious position as high-profile literary author. Lumby's chapter arrangement is thematic, but also loosely chronological—earlier chapters deal with Moorhouse's early life and career, later with late, yet they map to themes in his work and career that span the decades. From the perspective of literary history, neither book is exhaustive, though Lamb's—the first volume of a proposed two-volume cultural biography—most closely approaches that quality when taken on its own historicist terms. Lamb's book aims for a greater degree of objectivity than Lumby's, and although Lamb and his subject appear to have several things in common (both having worked as editors, both with careers largely outside the academy), there is a pervading impersonality of tone, verging at times on the overtly critical.

Moorhouse's bisexuality and gender non-conformism are given substantial treatment by both biographers, and both also explore his forays into publishing around these topics. Lamb is able to show in more detail how the material infrastructures and situated audiences of print culture allowed Moorhouse to write explicitly about both gay sex and gender non-conformity for underground publications, while simultaneously exploring these themes as an insider-outsider commentator in mainstream forums, such as the *Bulletin*. This meant that Moorhouse was not generally coded as a queer (or gay, or bi, or trans) author; indeed, critics during the 1980s and 1990s still treated some of his fiction (such as *The Everlasting Secret Family*, a collection that attained notoriety) as straight, if unusually graphic, homophobic fantasy. The closer examinations of Moorhouse's life in these biographies leave unanswered the question of what value there might be in drawing Moorhouse into queer or trans signification. Neither biographer is bold enough to claim that female focalisation in his narrative fiction represents transgender experience in itself, despite Moorhouse's enthusiastic transvestism and fictional treatments of same. Given how writing functioned for Moorhouse to mediate both interpersonal and social identifications (and desires) perhaps this would be tenable. Though Moorhouse worried about the rhetorical and social dynamics of the closet in and through his fiction, the specifics of his relationship to closet epistemologies vis a vis sexuality also remain to be teased out.

Even on the firmer terrain of biography, the authors mix candour with reticence about a few select details. Neither shies from the vivid details of spectacular incidents, including an adolescent injury much remarked on as a condensing metaphor for his nervous relationship to embodied gender; nor are the (possibly incriminating) ugly specifics in some of Moorhouse's unpublished writing withheld. Concrete information about certain intimate partners is excluded, though. For Lumby, this limitation is methodologically determined, as her interview-driven approach relied on the cooperation of Moorhouse, his family and friends; her material also covers the full breadth of Moorhouse's life and career, including more recent works and events. Her examination is guided, too, by Moorhouse's one-time partner (and Lumby's personal friend), Fiona Giles. Lamb is less reticent about naming names, but his book's narrative ends nearly 50 years before its publication, reducing possible consequences of disclosure. All biography necessitates selectivity, so the fact that some details remain hidden among Moorhouse's voluminous papers at the University of Queensland, or in the memories of friends and lovers, is hardly a damning fault.

Moorhouse's parrhesiastic qualities are weighted differently by each biographer. One consequence of Lumby's partiality is that her account seems less able to grapple with Moorhouse's complex relationships to social power and privilege, especially class, than Lamb's does. Moorhouse's politics in Lumby's account are liberal humanist, and we get glimpses of an establishment figure whose complaints against both social movements and literary culture are occasionally remote (or peevish), despite his biographer's protestations on behalf of his radical cred. The author's ironised role as hedonistic adventurer, dependent on networks of friends and patrons, is inhabited most fully in his later works (such as *Late Shows* and *Martini: A Memoir*) upon which Lumby draws. Lumby's implicit dismissal of "horny old Marxists" (269; a phrase offered by Giles) risks foreclosing important leftist critiques of Moorhouse voiced by writers such as Tim Rowse and Sascha Morrell. In its contrary skew towards leaner times in Moorhouse's life, Lamb's book gives a richer picture of Moorhouse's own oppositional and countercultural cred. His examination of Moorhouse's substantial (if idiosyncratic) activity in adult education and activism, as well as his close written engagement with proponents of the New Left, thus offers a complement of sorts to Lumby's latter day portrait: Moorhouse's dispute with leftism comes to seem more autocritical when framed against this material.

Both biographers portray Moorhouse's hedonism as tempered by firm dedication to making a success of writing for media (including film) and as a published literary author. Lamb shows in intricate detail what Lumby affirms through anecdote and example: Moorhouse's already substantial published output was the product of his great productivity, grounded in considerable effort. Still, in a period where autofiction (and even autotheory) are critically weighted terms, the notion of *interest*, and especially self-interest, should be more interesting to biographers and literary historians alike. One key insight gleaned from Lamb's account is that self-interest could carry its own contradictions in a career such as Moorhouse's: self-interest could take the form of pursuit of material and intellectual goals in tandem, simultaneously seeking the attention of a public, and forms of influence; it could also take the form of attending to the self, its vagaries and inconsistencies, in creative, often critical ways. And though many of Moorhouse's chosen causes were transparently motivated by at least some degree of material self-interest (for example, his early cultural nationalism *and* later cosmopolitanism, copyright activism, anti-censorship and anti-surveillance activism and advocacy), this does not mean that he was wrong to pursue them.

Both biographers explore Moorhouse's juvenilia, Lumby selectively, Lamb more exhaustively. None of this material has been accessed in any sustained way by other critics. Lumby notes that among these early works some "astonishingly big-picture questions" (23) are treated; true to the "cultural" emphasis of his biography, Lamb gives an account of how Moorhouse's reading as an adolescent fed his writing, and that this reading included works of psychology and (banned) literature, as well as *The Family of Man* photographic collection which was a shared touchstone for Moorhouse and his circle, and later reappeared in his mid-60s fiction. This precocity did not translate to early or quick success, however, even though in the public perception, his work in the early 1970s was connected to youth culture. One final contradiction, then: through his reading of Moorhouse's reading, Lamb does more to situate Moorhouse's own reflections on culture and media in relation to major perspectives in twentieth century media studies than does media academic Lumby. A further twist: it is Lumby who engages most explicitly with contemporary literary studies' appraisal of Moorhouse's writing. Lamb's historicism and detailed discussion of the immediate reception of Moorhouse's work puts questions of contemporaneous valuation foremost.

Regardless of these relative strengths and weaknesses, it would be unfair to expect a definitive work of literary criticism from any biography, whether "personal" or "cultural." Such work thus remains to be done. When it is, it will have to contend with the granular contextualising work of Lamb's book as well as the more sweeping inflection of Lumby's appraisal. The complex and contradictory Moorhouse lives in both, and these books will inevitably be interlocutors in debates to come.

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