

**Bernadette Brennan. *Brian Castro's Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language*.
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Brian Castro is one of Australia's most awarded but unread novelists. If that declaration holds any truth, then Bernadette Brennan's *Brian Castro's Fiction: The Seductive Play of Language* might just be the book to overcome the disparity between recognition and neglect.

With some notable exceptions, Castro's writing tends to be interpreted in nationalist terms, having been classified as an example of either 'Asian Australian' or Australian postmodern fiction. That discussion of Castro is confined to chapters on 'Asian-Australian literature' (Deborah L. Madsen) and 'Multicultural writing' (Wenche Ommundsen) in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer's *Companion to Australian Literature since 1900* (2007) has recently reinforced this tendency. By contrast, Brennan's strategy is to allow Castro, as she says, to lead in this dance, and to observe where he takes his readers. Out of Castro's allusive fiction Brennan produces an exploration of death, memory, exile and abandonment. She also draws upon the philosophy and literary theory of Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes in pursuing the twin issues of writing and death, and the death of the author. As Gail Jones pointed out at the launch of *Brian Castro's Fiction*, this is probably the first extended use of Blanchot in Australian literary criticism.

There are two types of gift in Castro's writing. Most obviously, his fiction depicts families and communities that are held together by the obligation to return gifts and favors. The narrative of his 1994 novel *Drift* is structured on a potlatch economy that binds the Indigenous people and the sojourning sealers of the Bass Strait Islands in cycles of violent exchange, and binds nations linked by colonisation.¹ The potlatch echoes the Chinese custom of *guanxi*, of reciprocity and exchange, which holds together the families and acquaintances of Castro's fiction, particularly his fictional autobiographies *Pomeroy* and *Shanghai Dancing*. In these narratives there is always a mother who gives unstintingly, whose gifts are never returned and who demands no obligation. Her offerings are suggestive of the gift of literature: the gift that asks no return, and it is in this spirit that Bernadette Brennan offers her introduction to Castro's fiction.

Brennan's critique calls forth a community around Castro's writing. Her monograph overflows with her passionate, intelligent response to Castro's fiction but she never exhausts her ideas. Resisting the seduction of conclusiveness, she provides a solid foundation for readers of Castro's fiction, allowing her discussion to return repeatedly to the themes of writing, memory, desire and death. Such an open-ended reading reveals its particular advantage when we come to *Drift*. I think of this as Castro's most confusing novel because of its resistance to any dominant narrative thread, but Brennan keeps

control of her complex discussion of writing and death, writing, play, politics and history, and of the horrendous audacity—at least in the way that it is represented by Castro—of B. S. Johnson’s ‘literary suicide’. Each idea remains important without crowding out other lines of thought. Following the spirit of Castro’s ever-disorientating fiction, Brennan’s monograph extends his gift to readers.

If Brennan allows Castro to take the lead, she also brings much to his writing. Maurice Blanchot is not mentioned in Castro’s fiction or essays, but his philosophy finds a welcome home in these imaginative forays. Blanchot’s concern with the place of death in literature and the spectral literary voice informs the awareness of failure and the teasing present-absences to which Castro always returns. Where most readers attend to cultural identity, Brennan reads Castro’s fiction for absence and silence and conversations between texts. This is not to say that she is always dealing in abstractions. Brennan offers the clearest discussion yet of the ethics and politics of Castro’s engagement with history, of the political ramifications of his playful texts. For Brennan, Castro’s use of historical source material generates textual traces that well-up in the present; she frames *Drift’s* narrative of Tasmanian colonial violence as ‘not so much a remembrance of the dead as a continuing conversation with the dead’ (106). She develops this conception of history further while attending to Benjaminian time in her chapter on *Shanghai Dancing*, observing that for both Castro and Walter Benjamin, ‘the present is not the culmination of a linear, homogenous past. The past is not some distant, contained or stable entity. The past becomes present through the act of recognition.’ (154)

Brennan’s approach to Castro’s textual silences displays a sensitivity achieved by no other Castro reader to date, with the possible exception of Helen Daniels. She does not co-opt the unsaid for nationalist or postcolonial claims. Where other critics tend to orientate their discussion to character, Brennan is sensitive to the way many of Castro’s characters signal their nonexistence within the story worlds. This is a remarkable trait of Castro’s fiction, and what becomes most interesting reading *Brian Castro’s Fiction* is not the idea that these characters do not exist (this is fiction after all) but the way Castro continuously writes characters whose fragility—their untenable dialogue, lack of psychological depth, archetypal configurations, abilities to speak multiple languages seamlessly—flickers before our eyes to signal their nonexistence. Likewise, in contrast with readings based on national identity, Brennan attends to the non-existence of the places in Castro’s fiction, thereby destabilising *Drift’s* Tasmania and *Stepper’s* Tokyo. These ideas have further ramifications: her attention to absence informs her reading, across Castro’s *oeuvre*, of the figure of ‘the double who is also the ghost-writer’ (58). This is a figure that brings together the death of the author and Blanchot’s understanding of literature as a response to death. And again, although Brennan does not focus overly on the issue of autobiography, her entreaty to readers to think of Castro’s ‘literary and autobiographical reflections in terms of a double gesture of constructing and undoing’ would seem extremely useful considering the difficulty of speaking about these seemingly contradictory strains in his fiction (165, quoting Gerhard Richter).

Brennan offers this critical apparatus in the spirit of Castro’s fiction, framing the engagement between reader and text as a patient seduction. This seduction describes the

relationship between Brennan and Castro's fiction as much as that between Brennan's imagined readers and her monograph. By allowing her reading to be led by the allusions of Castro's writing she opens up the novels; delighting her reader and providing important contextualisation. This hermeneutics particularly grounds her chapters on *Shanghai Dancing* and *The Garden Book*, which she reads respectively for a literary inheritance, and for repressed Chinese women's poetry and the history of the Chinese in Victoria. Brennan's readings are beautifully accessible, aiming to overcome the obstacles that many readers have found when faced with what is seen as 'difficult' fiction. Gesturing to key philosophers and creative writers, she sketches the complexity of Castro's ideas without overburdening her survey. This is particularly the case with cultural theory. I did wonder whether Brennan was following Castro's direction in this sense. She writes, 'as readers, we understand Castro's concern about the power of theory, particularly postmodern theory, to undo the productive and constructive power of story' (58). For me, Brennan's at her best when she gives these theoretical frames the attention they require. Her chapter on *After China* stands out from the others because it pays full attention to Frederic Jameson, Wolfgang Iser and Blanchot. It is here that the role of architecture, failure, present-absence and death in Castro's fiction is explored in a level of detail for which the critical response to his fiction has been crying out.

Academic readers familiar with Brennan's work will be delighted by the opportunities offered her by the form of the 'single-author monograph'. Brennan significantly transforms her earlier papers on Castro. Her *Drift* chapter, for example, pursues the idea of invention out of nothingness rather than loss, suggesting further ramifications of Blanchot's thinking. Brennan devotes a chapter to each novel, and this is especially important in the case of *Pomeroy*, which has received almost no critical attention, and probably would not but for such a comprehensive survey. Writing into a critical silence, her analysis of *Pomeroy* is particularly revealing:

Superficially, *Pomeroy* appears to be an extremely busy narrative [...] But the blank sheets of whiteness, the nothingness written over by Pomeroy's pen, reappear in full view at the moment of his death: 'The snow piled up in sheets before him. Already written.' We experience the 'Heeee, heeee. *The wind of death and the smell of corpses*' (207). Rudi has Pomeroy in his telescopic sights, but words, too, are 'focusing like sights'; he is going to kill this author to stop his narrative. But the narrative cannot be silenced because the 'residue of language', the text, always outlasts the death of the author. (46)

Without needing to labour such ideas, the form allows these themes to develop depth through repeated return and demonstrates the development of Castro's thinking and practice. If Brennan's assertions sometimes seem overly ambitious, like the claim that 'Castro seeks to unwrap death'² by examining writing and death from a different perspective with each novel, *Brian Castro's Fiction* does seem to sketch an encounter with the mystery of the tomb. It is also in these returns that much of the melancholy pain of Castro's writing is revealed. Lacking a strong investment in character, his fiction can

at times seem emotionless and distanced, but by constantly worrying at themes and leitmotifs his narratives—and Brennan’s essays in turn—encourage us to care.

Brennan’s monograph also bears significance beyond its immediate purpose. Her book is released at a time when we seem to be almost incessantly bemoaning the demise of Australian literature and Australian literary criticism. Against our institutional melancholy, and its implicit denial of the literary fiction and criticism that continues to appear, Brennan’s effort defends both endeavours. This is the second in Cambria Press’ series of critical monographs on Australian Literature, edited by Susan Lever and inaugurated by her *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia*, and I’m encouraged by the expectation of more such efforts in the near future. Fittingly, Brennan’s critique makes no concessions to parochial ideas of a national literature. Instead, she provides a persuasive account of Castro’s kinship with modernist writers such as Kafka, Proust, Benjamin, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Sebald and Nabokov and poststructuralist thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Wolfgang Iser, Frederic Jameson, Paul de Man, Mark C. Taylor, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

Considering the scope of Lever’s book on Foster, I did lament Brennan’s decision not to give extended attention to Castro’s short stories and essays, which rarely receive the attention they deserve and, more significantly, engage dynamically with his novels. Somewhat inexplicably, she largely restricts her argument to those essays collected in *Looking for Estrellita* (1999). Her use of these essays certainly contextualises Castro’s changing intellectual landscape, but I do wonder if this is enough. Each year Castro produces one or two essays or talks that are excellent examples of their genres and playful yet searing exercises in imaginative cultural criticism. I worry that Brennan’s approach reduces Castro’s essays, positioning them as mere guides to the novels. I also wanted her conversation to build more between and across chapters. Why not extend her excellent discussions of, for example, time and the ironic fall from paradise beyond *Shanghai Dancing*? These ideas are undoubtedly important in Castro’s other novels and also find expression in his various short fiction and non-fiction. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that Brennan’s strategy allows each novel to stand in its own right; as in the end of *Drift* when hope is invested in a child’s ‘magic slate’, the ideational slate is wiped clean with each new novel. This means that *Double Wolf* can privilege fiction over theory while *After China* can deny any interpretive centre. Dominant narratives, as always in Castro’s writing, slip from our grasp.

Brennan wears her passion for Castro’s writing unashamedly. She does not judge his fiction in the critical sense except to note that some of his jokes in *Drift* are in poor taste. I did wonder whether we’d missed an opportunity to encounter her considered opinion in response to some of the ambivalences of Castro’s fiction. The extent to which women bear the cost of Castro’s themes really stood out for me when reading this book. Brennan does touch on these concerns in her discussion of *The Garden Book*. She observes: ‘while “unhousedness” and exile are celebrated in Castro’s *oeuvre* as being necessary for writing, Swan’s exile and isolation in this racist, suspicious, patriarchal environment [of early 20th Century Australia] are simply destructive’ (180). Nevertheless, it is not in the spirit of this book to pursue such judgment. The joy of such a survey is that Brennan can

pick up on so much of the minutiae that would not fit into the focused argument demanded of articles written for peer-reviewed journals. Among my favourite moments is her discussion of the influence of Frederic Jameson's ideas of postmodern space and Japanese Metabolist architecture on *After China*. Extending Castro's fictional exploration of these ideas to Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, completed five years after the publication of *After China*, demonstrates the ongoing allure of Castro's fiction which, like metabolist architecture, seems to change to suit the reader's experience. Brennan's attention to such detail reveals ongoing delight at the way Castro's fiction fleshes the experience of modernity.

Brian Castro's new novel, *The Bath Fugues*, is set for release in May. I can't wait for the continuation of this conversation.

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NOTES

- ¹ Karen Barker was the first to write of this economy of *Drift*. See 'The Milk of Mother's Kindness in Brian Castro's 'Drift''. *Current Tensions: Proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference: 6-11 July 1996, Association for the Study of Australian Literature*. Ed. Sharyn Pearce and Philip Neilsen. Brisbane: Queensland U of Technology, 1996. 228-235.
- ² The full statement is, 'Castro seeks to unwrap death, to set it free from the silences in language and beneath language where it lurks, and he embraces death as a powerful creative force of freedom and responsibility' (13).