

Brigid Rooney. *Literary Activists: Writer-intellectuals and Australian public life.*

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One of the questions asked by Brigid Rooney in *Literary Activists: Writer-intellectuals and Australian public life*, as touted on the book's back cover, is 'Can writers really change the world?' While I certainly believe in the capacity of literary or aesthetic experience to enable transformation in the reader, who is inevitably located in the world—indeed, even an arcade shooting game can make the player feel empowered in its aftermath—I must admit to approaching this book with some skepticism.

A number of things were playing on my mind. I had recently read Susan Keen's empirical study of the effects of literary texts, *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), in which she argues persuasively that only three novels have ever had unambiguous, positive, real-world consequences. These are Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-2), which mobilized anti-slavery sentiment; Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1873-8), which prevented a full implementation of the workhouse system outlined in the New Poor Laws; and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which raised consciousness about, and led to action to prevent, female genital mutilation. Indeed, perhaps the failure of books themselves to bring about genuine social change accounts for writers' forays into public activism of the kind Rooney discusses in her book. In that case, then, activists, rather than writers—as the title of Rooney's book possibly acknowledges—change the world.

I also had in mind a recent experience inside a friend's independent bookstore, which is located on a cosmopolitan shopping street. Two young women, in chunky scarves, skinny jeans and ballet flats, walked past on the street outside. We didn't catch the start of the conversation, which may very well have been, 'Let's go in to Paton's Books,' but we did hear the rejoinder: 'No one reads anymore!' In such a world, how can writers, even literary activists, have a world-changing impact? Rooney refers to the cultural capital still attached to literary writers, at least among the category of the 'middle brow', but she also certainly acknowledges literature's minority status, particularly in the aftermath of the Howard years.

While I don't want to sound like a victim of the Howard years, I also approached Rooney's study with doubts about the special intellectual or moral authority to change the world that writers are assumed to possess. As Frank Moorhouse asked, on being invited to contribute to *Authors Take Sides: Iraq and the Gulf War* (2004), why are writers better equipped to reflect on public issues than dentists or accountants—an anecdote Rooney relates. And does a commitment to literature necessarily translate, as Rooney alleges, to a 'commitment to literary-field-related values of freedom and autonomy'? (183) The example of Ezra Pound comes to mind.

Ultimately, though, the question of whether or not writers really can change the world and the concomitant question associated with the writer's intellectual and ethical authority are not priorities in Rooney's book. While she recites, for example, how Helen Garner's *The First Stone* (1995) caused a controversy in Melbourne and how Tim Winton's activism helped to save

Ningaloo Reef, she doesn't concern herself with making any exceptional claims for the powers of books and writers. What she does, rather, is show how the public activism and literature of her selected authors are complementary. Bringing together the extra-textual (for Rooney, somewhere between a cultural materialist and a biographical approach) and the textual, she engages in strikingly insightful and refreshing—as well as inevitably political—readings of the literature of writers such as Helen Garner, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, David Malouf, Les Murray, Patrick White, Tim Winton and Judith Wright. (In the conclusion, the less 'canonical' Richard Flanagan also gets a look-in.) Despite the expectations and concerns that I brought to my reading, Rooney's interpretations of her writers and their 'work'—conceptualised in an encompassing and coherent sense—and her lucid, jargon-free prose were not only engaging but also convincing.

Wright is given considerable attention in Rooney's study, which is fair given her extraordinary life of prolific writing and extensive campaigning. Upon her death, Wright was even remembered in parliament by a senator—surely a rare privilege for an Australian writer—albeit by a senator who, as Rooney clarifies, had completed an arts degree at University. (In a further acknowledgement of the marginal status of the writer as public figure, Rooney contrasts the lone remembrance of Wright with 'the outpouring from both sides of politics on the death, some months later, of Sir Donald Bradman' (3).) Interestingly, Rooney shows how Wright's literature and literary status as feminine bard were 'activated' in the public sphere in ways that Wright could not always control and that even contradicted Wright's actual agenda. Wright herself certainly understood the problem and had the integrity to do something about it, as an anecdote related in the book shows. In 1988, angry at Bicentennial nationalism, Wright withdrew anthology permissions for the 'nationalist' poem 'Bullocky' (1944), noting its regular inclusions on school curricula at the expense of other, more confrontational poems, such as 'Nigger's Leap: New England' (1946), which were being consistently overlooked.

While the connections between Wright's poetry and activism are conventional enough, more striking is Rooney's ability to find complementarity in the fiction and activism of Patrick White. Using A.L. McCann's work on abjection as political disruption, invoking White's novelistic interest in epiphanies associated with the abject (such as when Stan sees God in a glob of spit in *The Tree of Man* (1955)), and referring to White's presentation to a symposium of writers against nuclear weapons in 1986, Rooney argues that the project of 'imagining the real'—the title of White's anti-nuclear presentation—'describes the constant focus and serious intent of White's literary-political project' (55). Rooney also draws unexpected but credible links between the work and activism of White and Tim Winton. In the public sphere, White, despite his patrician upbringing, offered a persona similar to Winton's in its unpretentious character, constructing himself as 'artist-cum-labourer, rather than professional intellectual' (38). In his fiction, despite being critical of Australian philistinism, White also, like Winton, 'presented himself as someone who valued, identified with and cared about the ordinary person'. Certainly, Rooney acknowledges the limitations of the apparent projects of both writers. She notes, for instance, the resistance in Winton's work 'to the deeper recognition and integration of either Aboriginal or feminist perspectives' (178)—a criticism arguably likewise applicable to the fiction of White.

While Rooney's arguments about Winton's identification with the 'Every Man' (or 'Every Australian Man') in his public and literary work are hardly surprising, Rooney's reflections on

other writers, informed by both biographical information and close readings of their public and literary ‘acts’, can be uncomfortably incisive. For instance, she refers to Les Murray’s ‘oscillation between bully and victim’ (103), after tracing his problems with women and Indigenous issues to childhood experiences of school teasing and rural ‘dispossession’. She also observes how neatly, in the aftermath of the backlash to his political and literary interventions on these matters, ‘the narrative of the damaged man becomes analogous to the story of the persecuted poet’ (114). Rooney’s discussion of Garner is also unsettlingly perceptive. She refers to Garner’s ‘habitual yet skilled performance’ of ‘the vulnerable, questing, self-doubting and often lonely figure of the female author, forever the amateur ... setting herself against dehumanizing, institutional, professionalizing forces’ (157). While the characterisation rings true, Rooney’s cynicism about the willful performative element of this persona adds unnecessarily, I think, to the discomfort here.

More unambiguously impressive are Rooney’s interpretations of Murray’s and Garner’s literature and of the work it does in the public sphere. Rooney’s readings of gender representations in Murray’s work are rare and intelligent, and she also interrogates Murray’s alignment with ‘ordinary’ Australians and his antipathy towards an intellectual elite. Murray, as Rooney writes, is ‘a poet possessed of subtle and complex linguistic powers’, who clearly orients his work to the ‘elite’ readership he challenges rather than to the public whose conservative values he wants to defend (108). Rooney’s reading of Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* (2004), underlining the ways in which the book evokes religious imagery and the pseudo-religious status of literature in order to capture the sympathies of the reader, is an exciting highlight. Rooney writes: ‘The law is found morally and spiritually wanting, unable to provide a moral compass that can distinguish good from evil. So Garner’s book offers itself up to fill this gap, as prayer or devotion, performing a ritual *consolation*’ (146).

Another strong argument Rooney offers involves the residual connection between literature and the nation—something which even fears about the decline of the writer as public figure, which merge with fears about the direction of the nation, ultimately reveal. In fact, Rooney concludes by neatly pointing to the mutual nature of the relationship between literary activists and the nation: ‘literary writers have played an integral part as cultural change-agents’ for the nation, while ‘the political crossings of writers into the public domain, crossings that renew reputations and expand readerships, have as one of their effects the capture and harvesting of a symbolic capital otherwise migrating elsewhere’ (187).

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