
Geordie Williamson won the Pascall Prize for Critical Writing in 2011. This prestigious award is given to an Australian who makes a significant contribution to the arts, to the flow of critical and cultural debate in our country. The judges praised him for ‘the quality of his prose – often beautiful and striking – and his light touch with big ideas.’¹ As chief literary critic of the *Australian*, Williamson engages a wide audience with his astute, well-balanced reviews and penetrating literary criticism.

The focus of his latest work is the state of Australian literature. *The Burning Library* is sub-titled ‘our great novelists lost and found’, and the book is an eloquent plea for more awareness, attention and respect for our country’s writers and their work. If we accept, as Williamson does, that a national literature can teach us about ourselves and our place in the world, then this is certainly an aim worth embracing.

Geordie Williamson is not afraid of provoking controversy. ‘Who killed Australian literature?’ is the catchcry of his argument: the library is burning, going up in flames. He cites changing pedagogical values in university teaching, the commercialism of Australian publishers and shrinking library budgets as instrumental in this decline. Then he attempts to redress it in his insightful study of fourteen twentieth-century Australian novelists:

*The Burning Library* is an attempt to reconstitute a lost back-story of our literature. It is braided from the lives and works of authors who have been underestimated or discredited by ways of thinking about literature instituted in recent decades. The novels it celebrates exist today in the samizdat of perfect indifference; they were harvested from charity shop bargain bins and eBay shopfronts, library stacks and the further reaches of friends’ bookshelves. Up until recent months … many of the works it examined were out of print. (8)

The novelists range from the prize-winning and famous (Patrick White, Christina Stead, Thomas Kenneally) to lesser-known writers like M. Barnard Eldershaw, Elizabeth Harrower and Randolph Stow. Devoting a chapter to each author, Williamson makes a strong case for the reading and re-examination of their work, closely analysing one or two of the texts. His enthusiasm is erudite and contagious. He describes White’s *The Hanging Garden* (2012) as a fine example of the novelist’s ‘gnarled baroque style’ and praises Randolph Stow’s *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), ‘as eccentric as it is magnificently achieved’. He advocates a re-reading of Christina Stead’s *Letty Fox* (1946) because it ‘provides the most spectacular, sustained and representative instance of the novelist’s method: a huge and lurid blazon for her implausible art’ (53).

This is a book of elegant essays rather than a work of non-fiction to be read from cover to cover. I enjoyed picking and choosing from the individual studies, beginning with the work of the writers I knew well and then branching into less familiar territory. Geordie Williamson’s ‘personal triumvirate’ of Australian authors is Patrick White, Christina Stead and Randolph Stow. I studied Australian literature at the University of Adelaide in the 1980s,

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and my most-loved women writers from this time are Christina Stead, Shirley Hazzard and Elizabeth Harrower. Hazzard is not featured in The Burning Library, except for a mention in the bibliography of ‘Other books you might like’, but the thoughtful essays on Stead and Harrower are a pleasure to read.

Elizabeth Harrower is an interesting case study in Williamson’s argument that we have neglected our literary treasures. Since its recent reprinting in the Text Classics series, Harrower’s 1966 novel, The Watch Tower has come ‘rampaging back from decades of disgraceful neglect.’ Media presenters and writers like Jennifer Byrne, Ramona Koval and Michelle de Kretser are introducing it to a new generation of readers as a ‘forgotten gem’ and a neglected classic. While I am delighted that Harrower’s work will now be reprinted – Text Publishing is reissuing Down in the City (1957) and The Long Prospect (1958) – I am surprised by the furore surrounding this ‘rediscovery’. Harrower’s gothic novels were praised by Christina Stead and studied in Australian literature courses in the mid-twentieth century. Her work was reviewed in journals like Quadrant, Meanjin and Southerly and discussed in edited collections such as Who is she?: images of women in Australian fiction (1983) and Gender, Politics and Fiction (1992). Her four novels are available in libraries throughout Australia. How can they have slipped so completely from our view?

Williamson asks the same question about all of the novels in The Burning Library, as he argues for new discussions and fresh assessment of the work:

There is much to justify renewed attention to the authors and works … as models of style and form; as documents of honesty and integrity to balance against the mendacity of political narrative; as carriers of knowledge about people, a vivid gallery of Australian selves; and, at their best, as vessels of a beauty and a strangeness that elude any final, fixed meaning that might be turned to ideology’s ends, yet give pleasure to those who engage with reading as the joy, entire unto itself, of one mind meeting another (11).

As a librarian and reader of Australian literature, I whole-heartedly support Geordie Williamson’s aim of truly valuing our best literary works and making them more accessible. Let’s join him in this challenge. If you begin by reading the essays in The Burning Library, and then re-reading and discussing some of the wonderful authors whose work he praises here, that will be another step forward.

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