Endangered Species

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Bruce Bennett
AUSTRALIAN SHORT FICTION: A HISTORY
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THIS BOOK HAS been much anticipated and desired. Now, when asked by anxious students for something to read on the Australian short story, I can finally make a satisfactory response. Of course, I would still want them to read the actual stories — and more than once — but at last there is an authority to point them to as well.

Given past claims about the centrality of the short story to Australian literature, it may seem strange that a scholarly history of this genre was not written earlier. Yet critical neglect of short fiction is by no means confined to Australia. Even though, as Bruce Bennett reminds us, Edgar Allan Poe claimed as far back as the 1840s that the short story was aesthetically more interesting than the novel, it has attracted far fewer major studies.

Closely associated with the rise of a mass reading public in the nineteenth century, the history of short fiction more or less coincides with the history of Australian colonisation. Bennett notes local publication of stories from 1825 onwards and the presence of a number of significant authors before Henry Lawson, for long regarded as the founding father of the Australian short story. Marcus Clarke and Jessie Couvreur (‘Tasma’) are rightly singled out for the high quality of their work. In focusing mainly on the fantastic, mystery and ghost stories of pre-1880 Australia, however, Bennett neglects the equally strong journalistic sketches that anticipate the more realist stories of Lawson and others. If the definition of short fiction can be stretched to include, as Bennett does, the sketches of Henry Savery from the 1820s and more recent autobiographical accounts, such as those in the Bringing Them Home report, then it should certainly have space for A.J. Boyd’s studies of bush types, collected in Old Colonials (1882), but first published in the Queenslander during the 1870s.

From Lawson onwards, however, Bennett’s emphasis falls strongly on the realist story, which, in its various changes of locale — from the bush to the suburbs to the inner city — and central concerns, was to dominate Australian short fiction during the twentieth century. He provides an insightful reassessment of Lawson within the perspective of others who wrote for the Bulletin, and also gives excellent readings of the work of Vance Palmer, Peter Cowan and many others. Conversely, authors writing in a more fanciful and comical vein, such as Ethel Anderson and Dal Stivens, receive perhaps less than their due, while Les Robinson is not even mentioned. (If I had not had the pleasure of reviewing his reissued The Giraffe’s Uncle (1933) in the December 2002/January 2003 ABR, I would not have missed him.)

Bennett has chosen a straightforward chronological approach, with most chapters dealing with several decades, though the 1970s as the highwater mark of the contemporary story has a chapter to itself. This period, as he demonstrates, produced not only significant, often first, collections by the five male writers — Frank Moorhouse, Peter Carey, Michael Wilding, Morris Lurie and Murray Bail — featured in Brian Kiernan’s anthology The Most Beautiful Lies (1977), but also important work by Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley, Olga Masters and Glenda Adams. Here, as throughout his history, Bennett successfully counters earlier representations of the Australian short story as an almost exclusively male affair. While sensitive to local and regional issues, discussing the work of Astley, Jolley and Masters under the rubric ‘From the Regions’ in contrast to the Sydney or Melbourne focus of the male writers, for example, Bennett is also always aware of the international contexts within which Australian writers have been working.

Almost half of Bennett’s history is devoted to the period since 1970. Even so, it was impossible to cover these last decades as thoroughly as he had the earlier periods. So, while earlier there are useful reminders that writers from non-English speaking backgrounds, such as Paul Wenz, were producing stories in Australia from early in the twentieth century, discussion of work by more recent arrivals, from Asia as well as Europe, is limited. Given this, and the rather truncated accounts of the work of writers such as David Brooks, Gail Jones and Gerald Murnane, it is surprising to find sections on crime and science fiction in the final chapter. Not from a high versus popular perspective, but simply because Australian writing in these genres has, especially more recently, been almost exclusively novels.

In the last few chapters, there is little on the links between the types of stories being written and available publishing outlets, something well-handled for the earlier periods. Amanda Lohrey’s 1999 observation on the difficulty of marketing collections of short stories, ‘unless written by established literary names’, is quoted in the introduction, but not followed up in later chapters. The controversy created by Hilary McPhee’s review of Peter Craven’s Best Australian Stories 2001 (ABR, February 2002) might, for example, have provided a useful conclusion, raising questions about the status and future of short fiction in Australia.

While excellent work is still being written, declining interest in fiction, along with publishers’ preference for the novel and the shrinkage in local literary magazines, makes me less sanguine than Bennett. As he demonstrates, many leading contemporary Australian writers first made their names with collections of stories: Carey, Moorhouse, Jolley, Beverley Farmer, Marion Halligan, to mention only the most prominent. All are now writing novels or, like Farmer, no longer publishing. It seems, these days, that Henry Lawson would not get much of a look in.