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Stephen Muecke is a professor at University of Technology Sydney, and one of the main promoters and exponents of fictocriticism. *Joe in the Andamans and Other Fictocritical Stories* is his latest book.

According to the Wikipedia article on fictocriticism, as most recently updated by Professor Muecke, ‘The traditional divisions among the practices of fiction, theory and criticism into stories, essays and critiques tend to be merged with fictocriticism which combines elements of these writing practices into a single text. These texts thus often tell a story while making an argument. They range from avant-gardist prose poems to more discursive metafictional inventions.’ The word ‘fictocriticism’ seems to be an Australian invention and the practice, according again to Wikipedia, has been ‘adopted enthusiastically in Australia and Canada’.

There are eight essays in this book. I call them essays, even though they’re called stories in the title: at the back of the book there is a note which says ‘many of the essays in this volume were published in earlier versions,’ and indeed there doesn’t seem much to distinguish Muecke’s ‘fictocritical stories’ from the work of many essayists, old and new. They are philosophical and personal, as good essays always are: Muecke himself lists writers including Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Don DeLillo and Michael Ondaatje as ‘a few of the diverse writers whose practice might be gathered under the banner of the fictocritical’ (16). Others might include J.M. Coetzee, Nicolas Rothwell, Clive James, Inga Clendinnen, Helen Garner, or
Germaine Greer. I appreciate it when he writes that ‘serious scholarship, in the name of objectivity, steers clear of performances in which the stakes are put on the table, why does this really matter to the speaker?’ (118). Fictocriticism might, perhaps, be seen as a plea for a more subjective approach to literary criticism to be accepted in the academy. But in this book, the main emphasis is on personal anecdotes laced with philosophical musings. There is little in the way of fiction and not much which could really be called criticism in the usual sense. Fictocriticism is indeed, as he points out, ‘a capacious category’ (15), but there is a point at which such capaciousness shades into meaninglessness.

Muecke doesn’t always succeed in transmitting to the reader the urgency of his interest in what he’s writing about. The prose is less than adamantine. In fact, there were times when I wondered whether the ‘ficto’ element wasn’t just an excuse to ignore the normal rules of grammar and sentence construction. Elegant sentence fragments are one thing, but failure to make the beginning of the sentence agree with the end, and misplacing punctuation marks, speak more of carelessness and haste than a deliberate flouting of outmoded conventions. One couldn’t call Joe in the Andamans a riveting read. I’m afraid I can’t see it being of interest to anyone much outside a small coterie of like-minded academics.