Regional or Better?

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My title is meant to suggest that literature which is merely of regional interest is inferior to literature which, even though understandably given Shakespeare’s “local habitation and a name”, has universal implications beyond that. Shakespeare himself, it now needs stressing within Australia, would never have understood the verdict of the writer of the Foreword to this collection: “The accents are regional, and we identify.” If we do identify with the accents only because they are regional, that says something about either our own parochialism or that of the literature in question, or both. To be fair to the literature, it is more probable that the provincialism is in the eye of the beholder in cases of doubt, since the critic starts from the premise that the accents must be regional for us to “identify”, while this view need not be shared by the writers who happen to work within a geographical context which they may well use as a point of departure instead of imprisonment. Nevertheless, there is perhaps something within the literature which makes the critic feel justified in his strange assertion.

Just how much, then, to what extent do stories like this from an international and timeless perspective, support Gerald Graff’s claim that “Contemporary culture contains few ideas capable of liberating us from its provincialism”? Certainly there is some work here which is not likely to attract interest in, say, the British Isles — now so persistently and tidiously under attack from some Australians who fear that they are being unjustly ignored by the very people that they are desperately trying to dismiss the significance of, or confusedly blaming for supposed cultural obsolescence as a result of very real “imperialist” political leanings in the painful past. But if such stories are of no interest to many English readers, those readers may feel themselves supported by all who refuse to “identify” simply because the “accents are regional” — which means the larger part of the globe. If one adds to this the fact that “regional accents” insofar as they refer to language are notoriously subject to change, one might predict that an anthology of this nature is sure to be read by very few in the not so distant future. Personally, I find it difficult, even now, to read with any interest a merely physical story like Michael Richards’ “When the Ants Look Like People”, and not least because of its use of the language of advertising (“You rehearse mentally the routine for the coming jump. Absolutely precise and detached, you will be a surgeon, lancing the sky with your body.”) While slightly less boring, and certainly linguistically less irritating, Lolo Houbein’s “Not Without Rain” focuses also too much on a “slice of life experience”, whether intentionally or not.
Another group is more of the "political" (not merely physical) kind, ranging from the infuriatingly prejudiced "The Well-Bread Thief" (Elizabeth Jolley) to the considerably more subtle "Swimmers" by Bill Baer. The author of the former is or was English, but with a huge chip on her shoulder about the country about which the editors, in a simple but inaccurate political-literary equation, assert that while it "extracted the wealth of the colonies it sapped also their creative resources by mining self-respect." (The failure to point out that only the Aboriginals were the original inhabitants of this nation is characteristic of this political approach; and in the case of the white immigrants one must, if this unpromising line is to carry any weight at all, distinguish between those forced to live here and those opting to do so - the latter, certainly, are no less guilty of extraction than the well-bred thief.) "Swimmers" is far more exploratory and persuasive as fiction, and the same could be said about Rosaleen Conway's "Good Old Joe". Indeed, one observes tentatively that stories originating in New Zealand tend to be at once more sophisticated in outlook and in literary craft than the cruder, heavier Australian examples.

But in most of the better stories such geographical reflections hardly arise. James McQueen's "Invitation" firmly creates its own fictional reality, but it is exciting anywhere. Paul Sharrad's "Crocodile" is not immediately easy to comprehend in terms of technique, but in the end raises just such important questions about the relationship between art and life as for some of the contributors (and many critics) are dogmatic foregone conclusions.

The most moving piece, to me, was Claire O'Brien's "Go, Said the Bird". While not as evasive as McQueen or Sharrad, the author nevertheless presents profound aspects of experience, and provides no easy answer. Here, there is, for sure, such understanding of cultural and sociological complexities as, in view of the editors' peripatetic notion that "the writers are all from races in some sense alien to the region", one eagerly looks forward to. I think one might even claim that some of the interest of the story does derive from the circumstance that contacts with different environments and people from different backgrounds can, in good minds, lead to increased awareness of fundamental questions. In that sense, the claims of the Foreword and the Introduction assume a significance not immediately apparent from them. All in all, the mere fact that one feels prodded into writing a review of this kind must, I suppose, show that the anthology is at least stimulating and varied.

However uneven, the collection was well worth producing, and it will no doubt help to advance the cause of both critical and creative writing in the South Pacific. My occasionally polemical remarks are not meant to detract from what is essentially positive in this book. Not a single story is really bad, though there are not a great many that I would be keen to publish myself; a number of pieces may be described as quite good or interesting; some are very, very satisfying indeed. At this stage it would be quite unrealistic to expect a higher standard, and the overall achievement is by no means without value.

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