



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



An Interview with Jean-François Vernay

Christopher Ringrose

Photo: Delphine Mayeur

The second edition of Jean-François Vernay's book A Brief Take on the Australian Novel (Adelaide: Wakefield Press) was released in 2016. This incisive history of Australian fiction is remarkable for a relatively young scholar, both for its ambitious scope and its innovative approach, employing structural techniques derived from the world and language of cinema. It is designed to appeal to the general reader seeking to test their views against Vernay's, to those new to the area of Australian fiction who might use it as a guide to their reading, and to those engaged in academic study. As has often been noted, Jean-François Vernay's French-Australian parentage and background give him an unusual and distinctive perspective on Australian writing. Jean-François is also the author of Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Christopher Koch (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), as well as numerous other critical studies. His book The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation will be released in August 2016 as part of Palgrave Macmillan's series Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism. He is also a creative writer in his own right, notably of Un doux petit rêveur (2012).

Christopher Ringrose: Which other books have tried to do what you did in *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel* – produce an accessible but broad-ranging account of the whole of Australian fiction? And did you take account of them?

Jean-François Vernay: There is a long tradition of historiography in Australian Studies which dates back to 1856 with the publication in the *Journal of Australasia* of an essay entitled 'The Fiction Fields of Australia' written by Frederick Sinnett. Since then, over a dozen literary histories have been published in book form, most of which were collaborative ventures. The edited companions by Laurie Hergenhan, Elizabeth Webby or Peter Pierce, for instance, are the work of multiple contributors who have been restricted to one particular aspect (period, genre, literary culture, etc.) of Australian fiction. These edited volumes have the merit of covering wider grounds than *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel*, but also end up being far more synthetic. Besides, they are academia-oriented in their format and approach (with

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extensive footnotes), which is not my take. I wanted to opt for a fun approach to Australian fiction so as to inform the non-specialists and give them a bird's eye view of the evolution of the Australian novel from 1831 to the present. I think it is fair to say that, with a few exceptions,¹ there has perhaps been a neglect in the dissemination of research in Australian fiction in book format, a lesser concern on the part of academics to make Australian writers more accessible to a broader readership, let alone to an international non-academic public.

Needless to say, I have taken my colleagues' research into account, and my select bibliography attests to that. With such a project, you are bound to fall within a literary tradition in which every contribution helps, even the ones from outsiders such as Nicholas Birns and myself.

CR: As you mentioned those who are 'outsiders' to a national literature – you deal with the issue of globalisation and literature at various times in *A Brief Take*. Is the idea of a 'national literature' becoming less significant in the twenty-first century? I think you are always concerned to show how Australian writing swam in wider, international currents?

JFV: From an outsider's perspective, the idea of 'a national literature' appears to be somewhat of an obsession on home grounds. Showing how Australian identity transpires in the fiction of, say, Tim Winton, is of less interest to me but I will not hesitate to detect in passing a metaphor of the Republican debate in Antoni Jach's *The Weekly Card Game* (1994), as being part of a larger analysis of boredom in this debut novel. No matter what part of the world a work of fiction comes from, I always engage with it on its own terms, that is with the critical apparatus of a trained professional reader² trying to find quirky angles to discuss fiction. I wouldn't go as far as to say that the idea of a national literature is becoming less significant in the twenty-first century, but it seems that a lot of recent academic work in the field shows that globalisation has inspired new directions in the study of Australian fiction.

CR: So how important is regionalism in your sense of the Australian novel – Tim Winton and the West ... Melbourne writers etc.?

JFV: Regionalism is to be primarily thought of as the scope some Australian writers have chosen for their literary projects. Readers will not go to Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) just to find out about the Gulf of Carpentaria or even about the Northern Territory at large – they can read that in a travel book if they are looking for bold facts or real life experiences; nor did Alexis Wright choose Carpentaria with an agenda to promote the region. Territory resonates with history and other writerly concerns and therefore represents one fraction of the complexity of a literary work. However, perhaps Melburnians might have a better immersive experience – and therefore an enhanced appreciation – of plots like that of Tsiolkas's *Loaded* (1995), A.L. McCann's *Subtopia* (2005) and some of Tony Birch's short stories in *Father's Day* (2009) because they might relate to the locales depicted in these narratives and draw a parallel with their own experiences of such places.

¹ Such as the literary history by Ken Goodwin and the two monographs by Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman.

² See Vernay's professional reader/ non-professional reader distinction in Chapter 1 of his forthcoming book *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), translated by Dr. Carolyne Lee.

CR: Your book takes readers back to the very beginnings of Australian fiction. Is your interest in nineteenth-century novels largely ‘historical’, or do you regard them as living classics that you would like to re-read?

JFV: How could you build a potted literary history without even taking into account the foundations? Nevertheless, I’m afraid my interest in nineteenth-century novels is indeed largely historical. I must admit that I specialise in contemporary fiction for a good reason. I am far more attuned to the pulse of Australian society on which I enjoy keeping my finger than to dusting antiques. [Laughter] All jokes aside, when you study the present it is often in the light of the past, so there is always an underlying interest in history, though one might perceive it as a secondary one.

CR: I would say that *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel* is theoretically-aware, using psychoanalytic, feminist, postmodern etc. concerns without being committed to a single over-arching one. Is that a fair summary?

JFV: Yes, that’s totally fair, as I have largely taken a cross-disciplinary approach. But a few bloggers have been quick in pointing out that *A Brief Take* does not come across as an academic treatise either. I didn’t want it to sound too dry. I was very conscious about the attractiveness of the book when I wrote it, hence the playful cinematic approach. I wanted to share my enthusiasm for Australian fiction by eliciting incentive-generating emotions such as interest, curiosity and attraction. And I thought to myself: ‘After all, why couldn’t readers derive pleasure out of nonfiction as well?’ And that essentially meant taking academic knowledge outside of university compounds and making it more palatable to a larger audience.

CR: As part of this project to share your enthusiasms, did your reading and research uncover any surprises – novelists you had not really been aware of before, or those you felt deserved to be better known in Australia and overseas?

JFV: No matter how exhaustive you try to be in dealing with such a Herculean task, the sad truth is that you will systematically sideline writers – and they are probably the ones who deserve to be better known in Australia and overseas. I have discussed the prescriptive trend in my ‘Teaser’, so I won’t elaborate on this. You need more than a lifetime to cover the grounds of the Australian novel, and 20 years is simply not enough. A lot of the novels I have read were not picked up with an intention of publishing *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel*. The bulk of them have been read to get background information on Peter Carey, Christopher Koch and other writers that have been the subject of my academic articles or personal research on Australian fiction. But at some point, in 2008, I felt overwhelmed by all these notebooks, research material and thousands of Australian fiction books I had stocked in my library (which fortunately has since been culled down to 400 odd books – giving a second, third, fourth, etc. life to most of these titles, which are now blessed with new readers). So at this point, I felt I should synthesize all this in one form or another. And the French edition *Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours* (2009) shaped up almost by itself, effortlessly. It all fitted in naturally, like a jigsaw puzzle. The end result was the major surprise, i.e. realising I had managed to cover all this ground over the years, within the tight confines of my spare time.



CR: How do you think Australian fiction is perceived by international critics and readers today?

JFV: Let's focus on the sunny side of the picture and gleefully observe that there is an ever increasing worldwide interest in Australian fiction: in the States, in France, in Great Britain, in Germany, in Denmark, in China (and there is an upcoming conference in July fostering international academic exchange and cooperation in Australian Studies³), in Japan – you name it. Some of the interest in Australian Studies has emerged in the wake of initiatives by expatriate Australian scholars, while other Centres for Australian Studies have developed thanks to the dynamism of local scholars. It is the fruitful combination of these various perspectives which is unique and should be encouraged to generate further literary debates which will give additional radiance to Australian fiction on a global scale.

CR: *A Brief Take* was not your first book. For example, you had previously written a monograph on Christopher Koch's work. After this much larger canvas, where will you go next?

JFV: I'm thinking of writing or editing a book on Aboriginal fiction, but one with a quirky angle. As usual.

CR: You are also a creative writer. How are your two kinds of 'literary production' connected?

JFV: My fiction is more concerned with New Caledonian and South Pacific cultures than it is with Australia per se. Having said this, my work in Australian Studies has influenced my fiction in subtler ways. My research on insularity, total institution fiction, the postcolonial condition, literature in the second degree (as theorised by Gérard Genette), to name a few topics, encapsulates the core elements of my text *Un doux petit rêveur*. This fable is the story of seven-year-old Benjamin, penned up in what American sociologist Erving Goffman calls 'a total institution'. Deep within his peninsula, the marooned child whiles the time away by embarking on mysterious adventures with his best mate Fil and, as the story unfolds, the reader realises that something is not quite right with them. It's a modern fairy tale about how incognizance and exclusion seem to be the instinctual responses and the easy way out to the difficulties we face in life. This short postcolonial fiction is also informed by my beliefs about the nature of fiction, which are exposed in *The Seduction of Fiction*. So in terms of creative flow, there are no more boundaries as words cluster into ideas and ideas give birth to fiction or nonfiction. Ideas circulate in and out of my body of work as so many literary obsessions a writer must come to terms with. And I may come to terms with them, given time.

CR: Thank you for sharing your ideas – and literary obsessions – with us, Jean-François.

Dr Christopher Ringrose is Adjunct Associate Professor of English at Monash University in Melbourne. His poetry and short fiction has won awards in England, Canada and Australia, and he has published critical work on modern fiction, literary theory and children's literature. He is the co-editor of the Journal of Postcolonial Writing and the book series Studies in World Literature (Ibidem/Columbia UP), and is a poetry reviewer for the Australian Poetry Journal.

³ <http://pkuasc.fasic.org.au/2016-australian-studies-conference-pku/>