

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Laura Deane, *Gender, Madness and Colonial Paranoia in Australian Literature: Australian Psychoses* (Lexington Books, 2017)

Gender and madness appear in the question that opens this book: ‘What is a madwoman?’ (ix). The answer is provided through the lens of feminist literary theory, psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory; Laura Deane is a lecturer at Flinders University with expertise in literary theory and world literature. As the title of the book also indicates, ‘Australian literature’ is the prime focus of her enquiry, with ‘colonial paranoia’ playing an important part in the analysis.

‘Australian literature’ is a broad term to encompass a critique of the three Australian novels that form the core of Deane’s thesis: Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and Kate Grenville’s *Lilian’s Story* (1985) and *Dark Places* (1995). These ‘three novels of women’s madness’ (xvi) are subjected to insightful and original readings that support Deane’s contention that

In Australian women’s writing, madness operates against a backdrop of gender relations that distorts and limits women’s experience and opportunities. Madness remains an important theme in the works of women writers informed by politics of gender ... these gender politics are also the product of colonialism. (xv)

It is this connection between ‘the abuses of patriarchy’ and ‘the abuses of the colonial enterprise’ (xxi) that enables Deane to make her ‘important contribution to critical interpretations of both novelists and also to the interrelations of feminist and postcolonial literary theory.’¹ Critics have long recognised the work of Stead and Grenville as fertile ground for feminist literary analysis. Late 20th-century critical anthologies such as *Who Is She: Images of Women in Australian Fiction* (1983) and *Constructing Gender: Feminism and Literary Studies* (1994) include well-known essays on their vividly-created female protagonists; Deane cites an array of feminist literary criticism in the course of her book. The ‘colonial paranoia’ argument is less widely canvassed.

Grenville is more easily associated with colonialism than Stead. Her award-winning historical fiction (*The Secret River; The Lieutenant; Sarah Thornhill*) forms a trilogy set in the colony of New South Wales; *Lilian’s Story* and *Dark Places* deal with the story of a woman born at the turn of the twentieth century ‘whose ambitions do not align with the gendered codes of colonial gentility’ (85). Kate Grenville is very well-known for her thoughtful fictional and non-fictional examinations of Australia’s violent nineteenth-century history and race relations. *The Man Who Loved Children* is a novel of mid-twentieth century misogyny and family politics set in 1930s America. But as Deane clarifies in her introduction,

¹ Susan Sheridan, quoted from the back cover.

Book reviews: *Gender, Madness and Colonial Paranoia in Australian Literature: Australian Psychoses* by Laura Deane. Jennifer Osborn.

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By situating the novels as narratives of colonial psychosis, I take up McClintock's call for ... a psychoanalysing of colonialism as the over-arching cultural framework structuring the Australian context of the gendered relations of power ... In Chapter 3, I read *The Man Who Loved Children* as a narrative of colonial psychosis. (xxvii)

This is a scholarly monograph based on Deane's PhD thesis in English and Australian Studies; *Australian Psychoses: Women's Madness and Colonial Psychosis* was completed in 2012 and awarded a prize for doctoral thesis excellence in the following year. In publishing this work, Deane reaches a wider audience. According to the promotional material, 'This provocative work will be essential reading for students of Australian literature, cultural studies and gender studies wanting an insight into the Australian psyche shaped by settler colonialism.'²

Certainly the content of the book addresses important questions in all of these fields, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to postgraduate students and scholars who already have a strong background in literature, cultural and gender studies. For other students of Australian literature and culture, I would recommend it as a potential item in a reading list that included less complex material – there are a number of excellent books and journal articles on Stead and Grenville that are helpful and enlightening at undergraduate or general readership levels. It is difficult to write for multiple audiences in a vocabulary that engages specialist academic interest while remaining accessible. *Gender, madness and colonial paranoia in Australian literature* is a published thesis rather than a book written for a new audience; it is complex and ambitious in its application of 'a post-Reconciliation lens to the study of Australia's gender and racial codes' as it places 'Australian sexism and misogyny in their proper colonial context'³ through Stead and Grenville's remarkable novels.

Jennifer Osborn

² Quoted from the back cover.

³ Quoted from the publisher's website, <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498547338/>