

**Susan Sheridan, *The Fiction of Thea Astley* (Cambria Press, 2016)**

Susan Sheridan's latest book, *The Fiction of Thea Astley*, is a comprehensive cross-disciplinary analysis of the greater portion of Astley's oeuvre. Interestingly, Sheridan's analysis focuses primarily on the interrogation of the role of emotions in Astley's novels and short stories. While the first chapter is aptly named, 'A Study in Emotions', it is from this platform which Sheridan launches her interrogation of the literary worlds created by Astley. Sheridan's book is the perfect reader for researchers and enthusiasts interested in the broader thematic, generic and socio-political preoccupations of Astley's bibliography. Sheridan is at her finest analytical self when she exposes the feministic undercurrent of Astley's novels. She situates Astley's works, as they should be, in a specific political and temporal space which Sheridan shows both creates and problematises Astley's writing. This fierce indictment of the patriarchy is one of the key elements which Sheridan interrogates in Astley's work.

Sheridan is quick to establish her awe of Astley as a savage feminist, declaring that her writing style 'mock[s] male pretension and assert[s] female rebellion' (3). It is in this same paragraph that the reader is introduced to the first of many passages which extol the virtues of Astley's writing, as Sheridan confesses that one of her hopes for the book is 'confirming her [Astley] reputation as a major novelist ... [to] reconsider her lifelong achievement' (3). Sheridan is, at times, heavy-handed with her plaudits but makes a convincing argument for the canonisation of Astley's work. The introduction of Sheridan's book positions Astley firmly as a neo-pastoralist writer whose construction of parochial and provincial spaces undercuts the authority of patriarchal culture. Sheridan goes on to show how Astley's early works accurately and incisively portrayed the disempowerment and marginalisation of women at the hands of this culture. In the first chapter Sheridan's interrogation of Astley exposes a frustration with an emotional austerity that overshadows Astley's narratological world. Indeed, it is this theme coupled with the alienation of the harsh pastoral in Astley's writing with which Sheridan is preoccupied in the first half of the book.

Much of Sheridan's analytical style relies on exegetical rhetoric combined with textual juxtaposition and comparison. Sheridan's knowledge of Astley's work is unassailable and she uses this to her advantage when developing her central arguments. In addition to this Sheridan draws on the autobiographical influences on Astley's work. Sheridan draws in elements of her authorial history in order to legitimate some of her claims about the meaning and value of Astley's work particularly within the Australian canon. This focus on the biographical meaning of Astley's work occasionally detracts and distracts from Sheridan's analysis, but on the whole it exposes the ways in which Astley and her work have been created by her environment; serving to justify her canonisation.

Sheridan eruditely teases out the transgressive elements of Astley's narratology, frequently exposing her flirtations with social, political and cultural undercurrents. Most tellingly, Sheridan sheds light on the ways in which Astley manipulates her characters to satirise and criticise

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politics and society. Specifically, she highlights Vesper's 'penchant for shocking and bizarre metaphors, not to mention gender dysphoria' and his 'sardonic, ironic voice and ... anarchic humour' as a form of the carnivalesque in Astley's work (45). Furthermore, Sheridan contrasts Astley with Patrick White to illustrate her preoccupation with male homosociality and homosexuality, particularly 'when a man is completely subordinated to another man' (47). This indictment of masculinity is another theme which Sheridan uncovers. She cogently argues that the narrative of *An Item from the Late News* 'links aggressive masculinity, nationalism, militarism, and misogyny' (81). Sheridan revisits this theme frequently throughout her book, illustrating Astley's disdain for and criticism of patriarchal masculinity.

While the book starts off with an emphasis on the study of emotions in Astley's work, it does not remain an explicitly dominant thread of analysis. Sheridan's dialectics refer back to the critical emotionality of Astley's work, but it is more of a side-note than a full analysis except in the first and last thirds of the book. In the sixth chapter, Sheridan addresses the trauma of Astley's characters, again keying into a common theme of her analysis; the pain of dislocation. Sheridan interrogates this theme from a number of directions, primarily through the alienation of the desolate Australian landscape but also through emotional drought, and vividly through the narrative of dislocation for Indigenous Australians. Sheridan also identifies 'the trope of departure' as a source of identity and emotional schism for Astley's characters (112). Typically, Sheridan explains, these forms of escape give the characters the emotional distance required for Astley to cast 'the darker elements of her vision' (112) on the ways in which history has crafted the contemporary culture. Sheridan goes on to show how Astley takes this exploration of emotional dislocation beyond the psyche, illustrating how 'memory and emotions are embodied' through the analysis of 'the physicality of his [Brodie's] suffering' (140). This notion is visited frequently throughout the book, but coalesces towards its end.

*The Fiction of Thea Astley* is an erudite and cogent deconstruction of the primary and auxiliary thematic preoccupations of Astley's oeuvre. Sheridan's intimate knowledge of Astley's bibliography is admirable and supports her analytical and critical conclusions.

**Pete Walsh**