

***Teaching Australian and New Zealand Literature* edited by Nicholas Birns, Nicole Moore and Sarah Shieff (MLA, 2017)**

Many collections purporting to discuss teaching strategies end up as sets of standard readings of texts. This one manages to keep a fairly consistent focus on pedagogy while simultaneously providing readings of key writers and genres. These are not proffered as ‘a conclusive or exclusive canon’ (4) but as samples of contested cultures and national histories entwined with overseas influences.

Two of the editors (Birns and Moore) open the collection with ‘Relocating Literary Sensibility: Colonial Australian Print Culture in the Digital Age’. They sketch historical phases (European imaginings, explorer narratives, convict literature, early women’s writing) making the important observation in passing that Australia differs from New Zealand in having a colonial past predating the Victorian era. Anna Boswell (‘The Making and Unmaking of New Zealand’) also underlines the variety of text types comprising colonial writing, ‘the foundational role of violence’ (30) and anxieties about belonging that repeat ‘arrival scenes’ and cross-cultural misinterpretations. Frederick Maning’s shiftiness in *Old New Zealand* provides a useful case study, Jane Mander, Ian Wedde, Maurice Shadbolt, C.K. Stead and historical films providing useful foils to earlier work. Australian equivalents of Lady Barker and Maning are canvassed in David Carter’s ‘Bush Legends and Pastoral Landscapes’, which shows the bush being pushed into history by early poems so it could be covered in a romantic glow by urban clerks and struggling farmers, a legend both consolidated and called to question by critics and novelists in the 1950s.

Several strands of debate can be pulled from this collection. One is the tussle between ‘relevance’ and ‘understanding’. These days of ‘student-centred learning’ oblige some to prompt students to elicit from texts questions and lessons that inform their own circumstances. Obviously this is a worthwhile thing to do, and (as some contributors stress) demonstrates the value of literary study in times that emphasise the sciences. However, such personalised inferences may have little to do with the actual content and style of the text without close reading informed by historical and cultural context. We can also ask what students might be looking for if they choose to study Australian or New Zealand literatures: presumably some understanding of the society and culture of those countries and how writers reflect them. Students (as Claire Jones points out in the Australian context: ‘Liberating Australian Literature: Teaching from the Postnational Space’) can also be put off by relentless challenges of their positions within the nation, especially when they have been going on right across their secondary schooling. The task of the teacher, then, is to supply background knowledge and a guide to reading without being a ‘top-down’ instructor and without fixing old hegemonic models of national difference. Equally, teaching might highlight *literary* vision, rather than making texts over into pretexts for discussion of social movements and ethics.

Close reading, cultural contextualising and making both connect with reader interests (and the three really cannot be mutually exclusive) raise the question of whom we are teaching. What a

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Japanese student will take from or need to know about an Australian novel will be significantly different from how an American student deals with the same text. Given its MLA publication, the book assumes that American students are the target. Most contributors project outwards from teaching in Australia and New Zealand (where classes nowadays are often an international mix), though some speak from teaching in France, Austria, the UK and Germany. All deal with the challenge by comparing the focus text to ones that students are likely to be familiar with, pointing up similar strategies of form and style but using the other texts to show specificities of the Australasian works.

The book opens with six overviews: 'Histories and Contexts' includes the three chapters mentioned, along with Melissa Kennedy's 'Teaching International Postcolonialism: Witi Ihimaera and the Familiarity of Family', Russell West-Pavlov's "'Terror Nullius': Contemporary Australian Frontier Fictions' (*Remembering Babylon*, *The Secret River*, *Journey to the Stone Country*, *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and Liam Davison's often overlooked *The White Woman*) and Wenche Ommundsen's survey of the emergence and challenges to literary values of 'migrant writing', 'Teaching Australian Multicultural Literature'.

The second part brings together eight essays on 'Frequently Taught Authors': Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson, Christina Stead, Allen Curnow, Patrick White, Les Murray, David Malouf and Kim Scott. Lydia Wevers finds Mansfield useful for crossing various category boundaries, including nationalist realism and international modernism. Sarah Shieff points to subtleties of narration in Sargeson and the crossing of mateship with homosexual desire. Susan Sheridan presents Stead's novels as 'a rich resource for the classroom because of their range of social and historical contexts, their complex constructions of gendered character, and innovative uses of language and genre' (111), concentrating on *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone*. Alex Calder suggests comparison of Curnow and Robert Frost, looks at the former's mix of realism and modernist interest in 'depth', and tracks shifts across Curnow's long career. For once, we do not get a disquisition on White's *Voss*, Elizabeth McMahon reflecting on teaching *The Twyborn Affair* as a particular 'queer' instance of Australian literature's 'processes of identity formation without stable definition or closure, betraying a fascination with perverse and volatile identities.' (133) that messes with the usual contract between author and reader, and with the tendency to teach texts as national allegories. This is more or less Rod McRae's approach to Les Murray's *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, though he notes the poet's project of decentring various centres of political and literary orthodoxy. Tanya Dalziell reads *Remembering Babylon* as an interrogation of whiteness, home, and the limits of imagination, using it to lead students to ask 'why they do not know certain things'. Hilary Emmett inspects the relation of language to sovereignty in *Benang*. She makes the important observations (teaching American Studies in the UK) that students know much less about Australia than the US, and that it is easier to teach Australian texts overseas because students do not feel so immediately threatened by implication in racial and historical injustice. Emmett also has some interesting ideas on prompting engagement with 'the book's inhospitality' (168).

Part Three takes us outwards into 'Global Connections'. Claire Jones closes this group with what might have been an opening discussion of the limitations of teaching Australian literature

in the old essentialist/exceptionalist national identity framework, though her piece relates mostly to a set of Australian problems. The answer to these comes at the start of the section: Chadwick Allen's description of the texts and comparative exercises he provides to his students of global indigenous writings. Brigitta Olubas uses Nam Le's *The Boat*, his speech on receiving a literary prize, and William Faulkner's Nobel speech to have students consider literary value and ethics: to whom does the writer owe loyalty – to himself, his character, to his father, to the reader? Maggie Nolan and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower report on their interviews with American teachers of *The Secret River* (supporting Emmett's idea that an 'alien' text can be used to lead students indirectly to confront their own position within histories of colonial injustice but adding the distinction between teaching texts as inroads to history and as literary devices) and Rosanne Kennedy looks at the range of approaches to Sally Morgan's *My Place* (identity formation, genre disruption, trauma narrative, postcolonial critique, gender studies, the politics of reception).

Part Four ('Course Models') addresses the fact that how and what we teach depends on the packages we work with in university curricula. Like Chad Allen, Jeanine Leane outlines what she teaches in 'Aboriginal Literature in the Classroom' but goes further in describing the sometimes difficult negotiation not only of student expectations and responses, but of her own role as an Aboriginal instructor. Margaret Orr writes of how she relates Maori texts to other modes of Maori culture (song, carving, creation myth, oratory). This is an interesting approach that is attuned to indigenous cultural contexts, but prompts this reader to wonder about unintentional side effects of ghettoising the writing into anthropological difference. One important message the essay contains is the need for a good deal of 'homework' on the part of teachers relaying texts from outside of their own cultures to students even more removed from the writers' world. Julieanne Lamond writes about *My Brilliant Career* in the context of gender studies, showing Sybylla's and Franklin's efforts to resist entrapment, and Claire Bazin rehearses theories of autobiography to show how Janet Frame's *An Angel at my Table* can be situated in classes on life writing. Claudia Marquis ('Threshold Moments: Teaching the New Zealand Adolescent Novel'), surveys major texts, from Margaret Mahy's onwards, raises the questions about what makes an 'adolescent' novel, and makes the notable point that characters are given some connection to Maori tradition as part of their entrance into maturity. 'Criminal Pursuits: Teaching Crime Fiction from New Zealand and Australia' by Roger Nicholson closes the essay collection, showing how the genre breaks with simple formulae, works with mobility, raises critical questions about seriality, and carries with it cultural preoccupations (Australia's being colonial history and race relations).

One thing that this book makes clear is our continued prizing of reading as a means of making better people. Despite history, despite theoretical rejections, the undercurrent in this book is that we teach to create self-reflective, socially aware, ethically attuned, broad-minded students. To do this (and in the context of two 'settler-colonial' nations speaking to another one it is only fitting), we teach to *unsettle*. It is perhaps a dangerous project in terms of keeping young people drawn to reading literature, but it is nonetheless a worthy one that asserts the positive role of the humanities in contemporary life. Another thing evident in these essays is the teacher's predilection – whatever the pedagogy – for textual complexity. Levels of competing meaning, internal contradiction, ironies, allow the performance of skilful interpretation and the conversion

of close reading into discussion of cultural production and reception, the perpetuation and the subversion of social discourses. There is a conflict here between what amounts to allegorical readings by teachers and the deprecation of both allegorical texts (pre-modern? pre-empting the teacher's work?) and texts that simply refuse complications. This reflects back onto the fluctuating critical fortunes of older nationalist and realist work, and is something picked up on by several contributors.

Reviews of anthologies always indulge in a 'what's in, what's not' game. One might point to many writers as deserving of attention as those included here. This would provide a sketch of how literary tastes have changed over time (once you couldn't talk about New Zealand literature without mentioning J.K. Baxter, or Australian poetry without citing Kenneth Slessor or A.D. Hope; shifts in 'women's writing' subjects have sidelined the once seemingly obligatory inclusion of *The Bone People*). However, selection is unavoidable, and there's no one included that most editors would *not* include. More significant is the book's strong concentration on fiction and the total absence of drama – always a cinderella at critical balls.

The editors close with a fifth section on resources: databases and electronic, blogs, journals, anthologies, general histories and critical work, film and multimedia. Anyone interested in teaching the two literatures will find this section invaluable. It is, of course, selective (work from Europe in *JEASA*, *Coolabah*, *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* could be mentioned, for example), but the works listed will take you to almost everything you are likely to need, wherever you happen to be teaching. The index is thorough but only contains people's names: cross-referencing of 'realism', 'left-wing writing' etcetera no doubt meant costs beyond the publisher's budget. This is a minor quibble about an otherwise very useful and readable book.

Paul Sharrad