

Michelle Arrow. *Friday on Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia since 1945* (UNSW Press, 2009)

With a degree of trepidation, I took to the task of reviewing Michelle Arrow's *Friday on our minds: Popular culture in Australia since 1945*. This 274-page book has acknowledgments, introduction, seven chapters, notes, select bibliography, and a 9-page index. The chapters suggest the forthcoming narrative that echoes the nation-building project of present and previous federal governments:

1. Popular culture and family life in the post-war years
2. The rise of youth cultures
3. Did the sixties 'swing' in Australia?
4. New voice, old themes
5. Imagining the national
6. No place like home?
7. Afterword: Popular culture and the past

A familiar dread washed over me as I reviewed the cover of the book, for I take the cover of a book as the opening gambit. Yet, before I opened the book and engaged with the thoughts of a writer I met two words in the title that spoke of community – 'our' and 'Australia'. The cover image, moreover, presented an interesting contrast to the current multicultural community I associate with Australia. The only pictorial figures and faces on the cover were those of European women and girls from the historical era referenced in the sub-title. The graphic designer placed two images of young female rock-n-roll fans over an image of sedate older women framed within the least significant corner of the visual. A black background effaces representational possibility for all other devalued subjects and thus the cover lacks signification of women of other cultures and males.

I found evidence of effacement in a typically unquestioned part of the text. Reading the author's work practices from the acknowledgements, I counted 28 female names including mother, sister, and 'our darling baby girl', passed over two names Hsu-Ming and Chris, and counted five male names: Scott, Leigh, David, father Roger, and Justin – an implied member of the author's 'new family'. I hoped I would find that the author did not hold with the trend of valorising women via the effacement of men and male-gendered roles. Alas, I learned that the hapless member of the 'new family' is a hostile witness to the making of the narrative. 'Justin, we might not always see eye-to-eye on music [I read here 'popular culture'], but we can laugh together at pretty much everything else, and [here's the cool bit!] I'm looking forward to introducing Saskia to all the joys [my emphasis] of pop culture with you.' The revelation of personal relationships in the context of academic writing is a violent and insensitive political act that pronounced the author's bias. However, what is not obvious is the question why read further? The quoted sentence contains the argument of the book. 'I'm looking forward to introducing "our darling baby girl" to all the joys of pop culture' says the writer does not adopt a *critical* attitude toward *popular culture*. The sentence confesses the book as a celebration of popular culture albeit written from the viewpoint of a woman willing to pass the culture to her family.

In the introduction the author dismisses and discounts theories at odds with the thesis and with deft concision manages to avoid ‘agonising over the increasingly artificial distinction betwixt “high” and “popular” culture’. Yet, without defining *high culture*, she uncritically accepts *popular culture* as ‘culture that is popular’. She admits the circularity as a weakness in the definition but adopts the definition ‘because it points to the importance of popularity in defining popular culture.’

Apparently, the book ‘examines popular culture in order to understand the massive social and cultural changes that have taken place in Australia since the end of World War II.’ Supposedly, the book ‘offers an integrated account of changes in a range of popular culture forms, meanings, production, and consumption in this period.’ However, via a post-structuralist mode, the author adopts ‘a transcendental anonymity’.¹ Unsurprisingly, metaphor and metonym blur throughout the text and the author used precious little space to define her terms. Throughout the book, I argued with the author on historical details. For example, I migrated to Australia in 1965 and grew up in Elizabeth which was never, as the writer puts it ‘a suburb of Adelaide’. A 45-minute car-ride from the Adelaide post-office, Elizabeth began as, and remains, an incorporated city with legal status equal to the City of Adelaide.

Through cumulative appropriation,² the writer constructs a swank veneer of history, for the text follows a chronology of historical dates. While I concede the author researched the subject matter, and wrote an interesting chronology of popular culture, I regret, the details are not encyclopaedic and the author offers a bare iota of analysis. To answer my opening question, this book sustained my trepidation to the end.

Paul Burger

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an author?’ in *Modern criticism and theory: A reader*, ed. D Lodge (Longman: London, 1988) 199.

² Foucault 202.