

Is Australian Literature Global Enough?

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What Australian literature is seems simple enough. There is a polity called Australia, and there is literature of this polity. Even people who do not know one single Australian writer—and in the US there are still some even among the literate—understand that, theoretically, Australia can have a literature. Australia is still a defined space, although the recent work of Elizabeth McMahon and Suvendrini Perera on continental and island identity has problematised that. A national literature of a state with multiple land borders with other states seems both palpable and gratifying to problematise. When French literature has been so exalted as a body at once national and universal, there is a thrill in seeing Frenchness trickle out to neighbouring nations, or be inflected by them. Moreover, traditionally Australia has not been seen as a country involved in the great border-crossing and border-altering wars of the twentieth century, nor, earlier, was it involved in imperial contestation as was Africa. In today's globalised world, Australia is not really isolated, and Australian space contains even within its domestic borders many plural national imaginaries stemming from worldwide hybrid and diasporic identities, not to mention the potential permeability of Australia's seacoast, as recent refugee flows have epitomised. Australia has worlds within itself: Italian worlds, Chinese worlds, Arab worlds, Greek worlds, Islamic worlds, Buddhist and Orthodox Christian worlds. Formerly one could couch this in terms of Australia becoming more diverse, more multicultural; now one might have to speak of a plurality of Australias, including totally imaginary ones like the Inner Australia conjured in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*. But, on the map, Australia seems this large island, a placid, magnified Britain of the South, and thus scores of recent academic projects that have taken on global literature and global modernities have rarely included Australia.

Yet it is really not so simple to describe what Australian literature is. Patrick White was brought up in Australia, lived his mature life in Australia, and wrote largely about Australia, but his years in England, his study of French and German culture, and his wartime sojourn in Greece and the Middle East, are crucial to understanding him. Christina Stead and Shirley Hazzard both grew up in Sydney, but both wrote their greatest work in New York, and are still considered—and considered themselves to be—Australian writers. Australia's most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin, originally was to be given only to a book that depicted 'Australian life in any of its phases.' These restrictive criteria were tacitly broadened only in the 2000s. In previous years, books set outside Australia were often deemed ineligible by the judging panels, as in the case of Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days*. There has at times seemed to be a difference between Australian literature and literature written by Australians. When Lily Brett addressed a conference in Kansas City in 2002, she evinced concern about whether the audience would see her stories, largely about displaced Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, as 'Australian' enough. Indigenous writers, who were not offered citizenship in the Australian polity until 1967, affirming identities that the Australian state has often seemed premised against, are at once the most Australian of writers but also those given the most short shrift in a layperson's

the hybrid, the extraterrestrial and even, in the case of Karen Russell's story, the ersatz, does not mean defining its former core out of existence or seeing it as retrograde when it is not that.

Nor is the idea of Australia antithetical to that of the global. Other world-famous writers, such as Thomas Hardy or William Faulkner, are not seen as parochial just because they were local. This could be because, even in their localism, they addressed themes of racial and class division in major world powers; but it is also a recognition that not all-great Anglo-American literature is set in London or New York. In the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper did not have to have English settings to appeal to a UK audience, and Dickens's portrait of America in *Martin Chuzzlewit* was certainly not designed to enhance his sales there. In Australian literature, though, there is still the idea that novels set in defined Australian local circumstances, such as Steven Carroll's fiction, are less viable on the world market. It is not global to see some parts of the world as less global than others; and if suburban Melbourne can be ruled out that way, we are just perpetuating the same hierarchies that led to seeing a single modernity circa 1920 rather than what are now termed 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt). We are ready to accept a more complicated and plural idea of Australian literature than what was there previously; we must, as Australianists, be prepared to ask of the world a commensurate recognition that Australia is as global as anywhere else.

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