

Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew. *Rethinking the Victim: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Australian Women's Writing*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019. 240 pages. AU\$62 ISBN 9780367786786

Published in the Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures Series with the assistance of an ARC Discovery Grant, *Rethinking the Victim* situates itself in the troubled context of violence against women, a broad field which includes family violence as well as many other forms. The authors refer to a range of major Reports, both international and Australian, into violence against women in all its manifestations, which detail horrifying statistics about its prevalence. In turn, that work recognises such violence as a human rights issue, with 'widespread social, economic and political impact and effects.' Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew also link increased contemporary attention to this field with the rise of feminist activism and theory in the 1970s, which brought the issue, particularly of domestic violence, from the private into the public sphere.

Their Introduction places the literary works they discuss firmly in this historical, political and social context, while each chapter develops its theme in relation, initially, to that climate of social research and public awareness. In addition, the Introduction defines and justifies all the terms the co-authors use; they prefer 'minoritised' for example, to 'minority,' 'racialised' to 'racial' and so on. They recognise that violence itself is a complex and ambiguous term, and seek to 'renovate' what is often the negative category of victim—hence their title—by developing the notion of the victim/survivor or the victim/perpetrator, or sometimes all three. All these ideas are developed through a discussion of the ways these terms and ideas have been theorised.

Brewster and Kossew also address ethical issues to do with viewing and/or reading about women being subjected to violence. So much contemporary visual material arguably depends on a kind of pornography of gendered violence for entertainment that viewing, writing and reading about it raises difficult questions. These include the ways graphic representations of violence might be presented in order to position viewer/readers so that they can interrogate and critique those representations rather than be drawn in by them. Again, the authors draw on a range of theorists and writers who struggle with the ways the representation of violence might avoid implication and achieve critical distance, in what is a valuable discussion. Finally, they use Charlotte Wood's award-winning novel *The Natural Way of Things* to exemplify many of the issues *Rethinking the Victim* is concerned with, before restating one of their main aims: to bring together 'literary works by a range of culturally diverse women writers especially those who have been largely excluded from the canon of mainstream Australian literature,' that is, 'minoritised' and 'Indigenous' writers.

Each of the four chapters is prefaced by a discussion of the forms of violence against women which are relevant to the topic of that chapter. For example, in the first chapter, 'Intimate Violations: Gothic and Romance,' there is a discussion of the prevalent social and media attention to domestic violence as well as the ways women writers might use those familiar and popular genres to shift what are their conventional depictions of women. The next, 'Violence Against Women and Girls: Indigenous Women's Activist Poetry,' is introduced by reference to the excellent sociological data that exists in the field of violence in Indigenous communities, data which is not, for Brewster and Kossew, replicated in public acknowledgement of that situation. Here, Indigenous women writers take control of their grief

and anger through the powerful tool of protest poetry. Sometimes its focus is personal—Lisa Belleair uses her poetry ‘as a means of breaking silences’; sometimes directed outwards—for Romaine Moreton ‘one of the roles of poetry [is] . . . to “move a nation to conscience.”’

The third chapter, ‘Broken Families, Vulnerable Children’ takes up the issue of the effects of family violence, in particular on children. Again, the work of major Reports that provide a solid social context for this topic is cited, but Brewster and Kossew recognise ‘a gap in data and research on the experience of children.’ It’s one which fiction may fill by way of its imaginative representations of children in violent situations. They use Susan Varga’s 1999 novel *Happy Families* as an introduction to the three sections of the chapter—‘Neglectful’ mothers, ‘Bad’ fathers and Indigenous women’s life history writing. The final chapter, ‘War and Political Violence,’ devotes less attention initially to sociological work in the area than to a discussion of the significance of war in an Australian mythology and the nature of our migrant population, many of whom have experienced both war and political violence. For Brewster and Kossew, this means that Australia has a ‘complex transnational diasporic imaginary’ in which these experiences are predominant.

This study takes up each of its chosen themes in relation to the work of a few very contemporary Australian women writers from a range of backgrounds, according to its particular aim to broaden the literary canon by using texts by writers from outside the mainstream. Limiting their range of reference to around six or eight writers in each chapter is useful as it allows for an extensive analysis of each of the texts. And what might be frustrating to some readers, who will inevitably think of a number of other writers whose work might have been included, is recognised, as there are continual references to earlier and other writers. For example, in the chapter on Indigenous women’s poetry, Oodgeroo Noonuccul is acknowledged as a significant progenitor of the contemporary work. And there are several acknowledgements of that idiosyncratic late nineteenth-century Australian writer, Barbara Baynton and her savage story, ‘The Chosen Vessel.’ In it, a swagman rapes and murders a woman who is alone in the bush, and her vulnerable situation is exacerbated by her fear of her absent husband. Women are at risk from external and internal forces.

Rethinking the Victim is a significant and timely study which will be invaluable to readers and scholars interested in its topic, as well as providing a body of work that others will draw on. Each chapter has a very substantial bibliography providing references both to the literature discussed and to the multiple issues its topic raises. Ultimately, the book is concerned with questions around the issue of the ways in which literary works might have social relevance. In what ways can literature be an agent for change, for instance, and how might literature perform a social function? Brewster and Kossew raise these issues, which remain in contention. What is perhaps the most powerful and disturbing chapter, on the activist, ‘protest’ poetry of Indigenous women writers, is most directly concerned with such questions. A citation to the Preface of Narungga poet, scholar and activist, Natalie Harkin’s book, *Dirty Words*, is telling. She writes that her poetry is ‘my “note-to-self” to speak up, to unsettle and to be brave; to not be silent when another voice would be easier or expected.’ There are many others though, and the work of all of these writers is hard-won and often disturbing. Emily Maguire’s reflection on these issues is also salutary, and sobering. She writes that rather than focusing on exceptional violence, she examines what she suggests is a ‘simmering level of violence’ that involves a ‘hard look at ourselves as a people, as a nation, our social values, our community values, our gender values.’

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