

**Anthony Uhlmann, ed. *Gerald Murnane: Another World in This One*.
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‘I had contrived for nearly 10 years to keep away from the university,’ confesses Gerald Murnane in ‘Save Us from Text Maniacs,’ an article first published in the *Australian* and later selected by David Marr for inclusion in *The Best Australian Essays 2008* (199). Murnane elaborates: his decade-long evasion of higher education stemmed from his ‘instinctive fear of the place,’ a fear that would be fully realised during the part-time BA in English and Arabic he undertook at the University of Melbourne between 1965 and 1969 (199). Though he never tells us *why* such a fear should be labelled instinctive, he does regale us with an explanation of how his prejudice turned out to be a well-founded one. ‘I have endured many wretched hours during my lifetime,’ he laments, ‘but hardly any more wretched than those I spent in English lectures and tutorials or, worst of all, at my desk late at night or on weekends trying to write the compulsory essays for English’ (199). He does not seem to be exaggerating. In fact, he doubles down on his claim: he has retained at least one of the essays he was made to write, but cannot bring himself to re-read it; he thinks of it as a ‘false confession wrung out of me by a pack of torturers’ (200). Readers of this journal, likely torturers or torturers-in-training themselves, may hope at this point that not too many of today’s undergraduates feel the same way, or that if they do they at least take the time to hone their feelings into Murnanean jeremiads of persecuted self-expression. Murnane continues, inveighing against what he terms ‘the tyranny of fashion’ in academic literary study. He depicts his former lecturers as pretentious snobs, egoists prone to sneering at lesser-known writers, who demand that students reproduce their valuations of canonical writers more or less verbatim. In defiance of the university and its tenured denizens he presents his own fantasy of writerly autonomy, ‘a world of anonymous texts’ in which unidentifiable authors are ‘unavailable for interviews’ but are nonetheless frequently ‘discussed and speculated about’ (207). To install this new regime would be to abolish the discipline of literary studies as we know it: the student of literature would be supplanted by the ‘student of sentences,’ whose new disciplinary mission would be to discover the ‘great difference between a shapely sentence and one with contours unaligned to any thought or feeling’ (207). Most of us would be out of a job. Which is to say that literary criticism would be thoroughly depoliticised: there’s no room left in Murnane’s fictional world for an academic like Ken Gelder who, critical of the ‘rarefied, aesthetic worlds’ of writers like Murnane, calls instead for a ‘genuinely popular’ form of political realism that ‘understands readerships rather than expresses contempt for them’ (56). Murnane’s contempt for his own ‘university studies’ is unambiguous—his final verdict is that they were entirely ‘useless’—and his contempt for academic reading practices here teeters on the brink of a general contempt for academic readers (201). We could therefore be forgiven for presuming that Murnane had cut himself off entirely from contact with such readers, and from the universities they tend to inhabit.

But this could not be further from the truth. In fact, compared with many of his contemporaries Murnane has spent more than his fair share of time on campuses, albeit safely ensconced in an office across the hall from the textual dissections and probing essay questions of his would-be torturers. After publishing his first two novels, he began in 1980 to teach creative writing at the Prahran College of Advanced Education, which was promptly amalgamated into Victoria CAE in 1981. He was therefore, alongside such luminaries as Thea Astley at Macquarie University and Elizabeth Jolley at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, part of the first wave of Australian novelists employed to preach their practice at a tertiary institution, where he taught

and wrote for a grand total of sixteen years. He worked at the CAE until 1995, when he declared his retirement from writing (temporarily) and teaching (permanently) out of frustration with the new bureaucratic ‘mode of administration’ that was introduced when the CAE became Deakin University (*Invisible* 180). And he worked there despite later repeating his claim, in a spoken aside omitted from the version of ‘The Still-Breathing Author’ that is reproduced in the volume of essays presently under review, to have ‘never been comfortable on any campus’ because of his ‘instinctive *fear* of the university system,’ a fear of being compelled to use ‘other people’s language to talk about reading and writing.’¹

It’s fair to say that Murnane’s anxiety is something like an occupational hazard for any tenured author, one perhaps stemming from their role within a system that somewhat counterintuitively encourages aspiring writers to find their own unique voices by subjecting them to the homogenising process of peer review. Murnane’s own classroom seems to have been tailor-made to abate this anxiety, as he claims to have spent most of his lessons encouraging students to silently read and comment on anonymous samples of work by their peers. Less easily avoidable is the compulsion to publish writing of a certain form in certain forums in order to further one’s academic career, a pressure Brian Castro savages as ‘a managerialism of content through a biometrics which perpetuates the homogeneity of monetary and economic influences’ (2018). Though administrators were not quite as tech-savvy back when Murnane was teaching in the ‘80s and early ‘90s, one can still see how campus culture would have triggered his ‘fear of the systems devised by other people, or if not a fear, then an unwillingness to engage with those systems or to try to understand them.’ So it comes as a bit of a surprise that like Castro, and despite all his professed aversion, Murnane has been repeatedly willing to engage with academics. To enumerate just a few of the many examples: a short footnote to another lecture-essay, ‘Stream System,’ indicates it was ‘written to be read aloud at a gathering of the department of English at La Trobe University in 1988’ (*Stream System* 30), where he was then writer-in-residence, and Carmel Bird recalls meeting him at the 1989 Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference in Launceston, Tasmania. Furthermore, Anthony Uhlmann notes in his introduction to *Gerald Murnane: Another World in This One* (2020) that Murnane was also a keynote speaker at the first conference on his work, organised by Imre Salusinszky in 2001 at the University of Newcastle (where Murnane had previously also been a writer-in-residence). More recently, on the 7th of December 2017 Murnane spoke at a one-day symposium on his work held at the golf club in his hometown Goroke, where the essays and reflections that Uhlmann’s introduction prefaces were first delivered as papers. And finally, Murnane has taken great pains to ensure that his work will continue to engage academics even posthumously, via his careful curation of a personal archive that includes thousands of pages of journals, letters, lecture notes and ephemera. He is therefore, in no incidental sense, a writer well positioned to become the subject of a collection of academic essays.

I’ve offered this brief academic curriculum vitae in order to make a relatively simple point that underpins my review of *Another World in This One* (henceforth referred to by its subtitle, to avoid confusion with Salusinszky’s *Gerald Murnane*). That is, despite all the instinctive fear he claims to entertain, it seems Murnane doesn’t really mind the university’s attention. It is probably closer to the truth to say he has done what he can to facilitate it. This is to say that, for all his avowed provincialism, Murnane is a writer who has encouraged and actively participated in the reception of his work in the very inner-city institutional settings that he continues to decry. Like the South Dakotan Calvin O. Dahlberg Institute of Prairie Studies in *Inland* (1988), which artificially seeds the grasslands that it researches, these literary institutions and their residents benefit from a co-dependent relationship with Murnane and his fiction. So in an interesting way, this is a book directly in touch with its subject—it includes new contributions

from the author himself, his publisher and editor Ivor Indyk, and his authorised critical biographer Shannon Burns—and this is a feature that encourages its contributors to pose some interesting questions, even as it tacitly discourages them from asking others. That none of the contributors substantively broach Murnane’s idiosyncratic brand of anxious anti-intellectualism, not even in its more innocuous fictional guises, suggests one possible consequence of this study’s proximity to its subject; that detractors’ accusations of his fiction’s self-centredness, facile fussiness, conservatism and elitism merit only passing engagement from one or two contributors similarly bespeaks the author’s presence between the book’s covers and inside the conference room (or, rather, golf club) that gave rise to it. On the other hand, there are perks to such proximity. Another title in Sydney University Press’s Studies in Australian Literature Series, Tanya Dalziell’s tactful book-length treatment of her doctoral dissertation supervisor’s writings in *Gail Jones: Word, Image, Ethics* (2020), is a testament to the possible benefits of such closeness. And then there is the fact that Indyk’s insights as ‘a friend, a critic, a publisher and an editor’ of Murnane easily ranks, alongside essays by Brigid Rooney, Luke Carman, Emmett Stinson, Shannon Burns and the author himself, among the most important and thought-provoking contributions to the collection (151). Nor could Suzie Gibson’s essay, which departs from a question she posed directly to Murnane about his interest in Henry James while at the conference, have acquired its current form without the still-breathing author breathing down her neck, so to speak. *Another World in This One* is therefore significant as an experiment in what is at times an uneasy collaboration between a writer and his critics, one that complicates the former’s self-proclaimed reluctance to engage with universities and the academics that inhabit them.

At its best, *Another World in This One* offers a praiseworthy series of attentive and careful engagements with the intricacies of Murnane’s fictions. Much of his oeuvre is intelligently analysed, and particular critical attention is deservedly reserved for the four works of fiction he has published since 2009. Along with *Inland* and *The Plains* (1982), these later novels are favoured by most of the contributors. Such a focus does come at the expense of Murnane’s earlier and shorter writings, which receive comparatively scant treatment. This is to say that one small shortcoming of *Another World in This One*, in my view, is its scope: while these early fictions have received a modicum of consideration elsewhere, most convincingly in Salusinszky’s *Gerald Murnane* (1993), it is a shame to see them relatively neglected in the first academic collection of essays to take Murnane’s work as its sole subject. But this is perhaps an understandable shortcoming, given Murnane’s published books (to say nothing of the numerous short stories and essays contained and collected therein) have his co-contributors outnumbered.

A related nit-pick, tied to the details of Murnane’s academic career outlined above, is that the contributors do not always convincingly locate individual works within Murnane’s broader corpus and its contexts. This is despite the fact that Uhlmann makes some effort to do so in his introduction, in which he extends the earlier overviews of Salusinszky and Paul Genoni by dividing Murnane’s fiction into three phases. The first of these, distinguished by the author’s interest in named characters and third-person narrators, consists of *Tamarisk Row* (1974) and *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976); the second, spanning from *The Plains* (1982) to *Emerald Blue* (1995), is marked by a narratorial shift from the third to the first person; the third phase, from *Barley Patch* (2009) to *Border Districts* (2017), marks a stylistic shift in the form of heightened self-referentiality, the sense that ‘the voice that narrates now seems still closer to the implied author’ (2). This is all perfectly credible, even convincing, albeit with the caveat that the second phase ought properly to begin with Murnane’s first person short story ‘Land Deal’ (1980). But the implications of such a division are not unpacked. That this division could well be identified as Murnane’s pre-CAE, at-CAE (1980–1995), and post-CAE output is not considered by any

of the contributors. Equally, the final of the three phases could usefully have been described as Murnane's Giramondo phase, as after circulating his first seven books via four different publishers he at last found, from the publication of *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* (2005) onward, a comfortable position near the head of Indyk's table. Another way of organising his work is suggested by Murnane's return in recent writings to the religious iconography that, as J. M. Coetzee has observed, reveals the indebtedness of his early fiction to both the doctrinal strictures of his 'Irish–Australian Catholic' schooling at De La Salle College and his truncated training for the priesthood at St Pius X Memorial College (260). Or the contributors could have taken up Murnane's claim in the volume that he is a 'technical writer,' who aims only to 'accurately describe the mental imagery that is [his] only available subject matter' (169): punning on this self-definition, it would be worth comparing his mid-to-late fiction to that of the highly self-conscious American novelists that Mark McGurl terms 'technomodernists,' those who identify 'with the "emptiness" of pure formality' as an alternative 'discourse of difference' in a way that displaces now-standard theorisations of difference on ethnic, racial, socio-economic or sexual grounds (62). Further attention to these or other ways of demarcating the phases of Murnane's oeuvre, though no doubt anathema to an author who explicitly rejects scholarly attempts to label him 'as though I belonged to some sort of school of writers or some like-minded group' (169) and claims to have 'no interest in politics or social issues' (174), would have allowed the contributors to more persuasively locate their arguments within the broader context of the author's engagement with religious, educational and literary institutions.

But, as I mentioned earlier, *Another World in This One* finds many insights on its own terms. Rooney's chapter stands out for the persuasive alternative it offers to such a methodology, even as it acknowledges how the 'sexually repressive, pre-Vatican II Catholic Church' furnishes Murnane's iconophilia in *A Million Windows* (2014) and elsewhere (68). In her chapter, Rooney reads Murnane's *Barley Patch* and *Inland* 'in reverse order of publication' in order to bring 'into focus their spatialised, topological relations and interconnectivity' (71). Beginning with Murnane's lecture-essay 'Stream System,' she argues this piece typifies the 'metafictional systems and streaming images' that serve as 'the most consistent and recurrent feature, the central logic, of Murnane's writing' (70). Hers is a compelling interpretative metaphor, one convincingly extended through her suggestion that each work 'forms its own internal micro-ecology,' while simultaneously functioning as a 'tributary to Murnane's interconnecting literary landscape' (71). But this essay's greatest strength lies in its engagement with, and sensitive articulation of, the feelings that lie camouflaged beneath Murnane's carefully measured prose. In *Barley Patch*, she finds a correlate for Murnane's broader preoccupation with 'images and scenes that deal in separation, mortality, grief and love' in 'the image of striped quail chicks in ankle-high grass that the youngest uncle teaches his nephew how to see, just at the moment they run from cover towards the sound of the calling mother-bird' (77). Likewise, she locates in the title *Inland* 'a figure for extended prosopopoeia—for the narrator's address to and summoning of the dead, not least the prospect of his own death, as implied in the persistent orientation towards that which is "in land"—that is, his own future burial in earth' (81). Rooney thus mounts a convincing defence of Murnane's fiction against the charge that it is 'merely self-indulgent,' clearly illustrating her contention that such a claim is 'tone deaf' to his work's 'emotional freight' (66). There is also a spirit of generosity to this essay, in that it provides both an accessible introduction and possible avenues for further research on Murnane's work. And, as always, the lucidity of her critical prose is to be aspired to. Given she is already the author of an equally well-written book on Australian *Literary Activists* (2009), it's no surprise that her chapter provides an ideal point of contact for further work on the politics of feeling in Murnane's fiction. The next step, I suspect, will be to consider the emotions his work engenders in light of Sianne Ngai's typology of late capitalist aesthetics and their accompanying affects:

her discussion of ‘the interesting’ in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012) offers a plausible starting point, but I suspect that Murnane’s one-trick performance of an inimitably pedantic authorial voice may find itself best expressed in her *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020).

Questions not of gimmickry but of authenticity are the focus of Shannon Burns’s chapter, in which he takes the fluidity of ‘the boundary between Murnane’s fiction and his life’ as an occasion to reflect upon the peculiar demands this author’s ‘true fiction’ makes on his critical biographer (30). Burns is unsurprising, but not by any means wrong, when he claims that Murnane’s so-called fiction ‘is far from superficially autobiographical’: nor is his suggestion that Murnane’s ‘distancing devices . . . obscure the vitally confessional and truthful nature of [his] fiction’ likely to ruffle the feathers of too many critics (30). More provocative is his sense of Murnane’s ‘two core selves—the ideal and the mundane—as well as their many splinter-selves: Murnane the child, student, seminarian, husband, father, teacher, epistolarian, public figure, racegoer and golfer,’ though notably missing from this list (perhaps encapsulated in ‘teacher’) is Murnane the creative writing instructor (34). But knowledge of his subject’s didactic practice nonetheless seems to have informed Burns’s stress on ‘the *deliberateness* of Murnane’s narrative strategies,’ and his sense that ‘this deliberateness changes the meaning of the work and brings its autobiographical origins into doubt’ (35). This culminates in a well-expressed—though again, somewhat unsurprising—reflection on the gender of Murnane’s ideal reader in *Barley Patch* and elsewhere. Though Burns’s essay only briefly alludes to ‘the intellectual, emotional, social and historical contexts that have influenced Murnane’s writing,’ it offers a promising overview of the methodology informing his in-progress critical biography (35). I, for one, am very much looking forward to reading this book, which will no doubt include a satisfying exploration of the aforementioned contexts and their relation to Murnane’s work.

Luke Carman’s chapter is of a different stripe entirely. It is a gently self-deprecating portrait of its author as a young writer, whose first encounter with Murnane’s fiction is via Indyk (their shared editor). The latter presses Murnane’s five most recent titles into the apprentice writer’s upturned palms: ‘You’ll like these,’ Indyk informs him, ‘in a voice as ominous as prophecy’ (13). Thus we’re given a depiction in miniature of how Murnane’s current reputation may have been manufactured: through the firmly enthusiastic advocacy of an actor as well-placed and charismatically insistent as his publisher. Carman’s own judgment of Murnane’s work, in contrast, is presented as at first naively self-centred. He returns some years later to his editor, having neglected to read ‘even the first few pages of any of these titles’ until then, with the conviction that he has discovered in the fiction ‘a textual doppelganger of my own mind’ (13). Proceeding via contrast with the figure of the widely read author idealised in Clive James’s ‘much maligned almanac on the humanities,’ *Cultural Amnesia* (2007), Carman finds in *Barley Patch* a compelling antidote to the myth ‘that serious authors ought to be walking encyclopaedias of high culture, whose every sentence ought at least to glimmer with an effortlessly referential signalling of the author’s breadth and depth of reading’ (16). For Carman, this offers an ‘unburdening of existential proportions, not least because it follows directly from the narrator’s admission that he is bereft of “imagination”, a capacity typically understood to be an essential talent for fiction writers’ (18). His desire to follow in Murnane’s footsteps is threatened by the suspicion that the latter belongs aesthetically to the ‘restrained, minimalist . . . camp of austerity’ while his own work evidenced the maximalist, ‘ornate, ecstasitician’s approach’ (21): but this opposition is resolved by his discovery in *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* that they share a mutual appreciation for Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957), which reveals Murnane to be ‘someone who could see the shimmering potency lying latent in the ordinary surfaces of the world’ (23).

Progressing via a series of homages to Murnane's conditional syntax and autobiographical digressions, Carman conveys his epiphany that Kerouac and Murnane share a sense of 'the generative potential of an ecstatic limitation,' an insight which leads him to understand *Border Districts* as 'a veritable manifesto for the limitations as the platonic first-cause of the author's entire body of work' (25). Carman's is an enjoyable essay to read, and will no doubt be of great interest to researchers concerned with both Murnane's and the author's own fiction. But it also offers, in its wide-eyed portrayal of a fledgling writer's revelations at the feet of the old master, a testament to the didactic quality of Murnane's writings. Murnane writes highly intentioned fiction that, as Eric Naiman has observed of Vladimir Nabokov's novels, has the effect of placing its 'readers in an interpretative dilemma': his is an authoritative authorial voice that both 'tempts the interpreter and threatens to expose him,' one unafraid to launch sustained 'attacks on the interpretative excesses of others' (114–15). This disciplinary function of Murnane's writing, which should be read in and through the pedagogical settings where he composed much of his best fiction, is also ripe for further critical consideration. What Carman's articulate and at times hilarious piece makes clear is that there is equally room for discussion of Murnane's pedagogical form from an essayist less deferential toward his subject.

Though my claim in this review has been that such essayists are not to be found in *Another World in This One*, Emmett Stinson's discussion of the way 'Murnane's late works enact a "retrospective intention" that revises the meaning of his earlier works' does come close (45). *The Plains*, which was originally part of an unpublished longer work titled *The Only Adam*, is in Stinson's view 'an exemplar of the fact that artistic intention can be thwarted, in various and complex ways, by material exigencies beyond the author's control' (52); later books work to reassert authorial control, lending retrospective coherence to Murnane's oeuvre by 'imbuing a sense of connectedness after the fact' (59). Stinson is at his best when discussing *Border Districts*, which he convincingly argues forms 'part of a novelistic diptych' (58) with *The Plains*, thereby offering 'a material corrective to the contingencies of publishing' (60). His insights are all the more interesting in light of the recent publication of Murnane's *A Season on Earth* (2019), the longer text from which *A Lifetime on Clouds* was excerpted, which suggests the author's ongoing commitment to reinstating the material that he was compelled to cut as a younger writer.

Yet both Murnane and Indyk make a point of quibbling with Stinson's claims; the former indirectly, in his complaint about those who assert that his books comprise 'a sort of program,' and the latter explicitly (168). For Indyk, Murnane works not 'retrospectively' but 'proactively,' by 'returning to images in later works which clearly have a charge which he didn't—or couldn't—elaborate on fully in earlier attempts' (157). This sense of Murnane's method informs Indyk's approach to *A History of Books* (2012), which he reads as an argument for 'a dematerialisation of the book': doing away with the physicality of the object beloved by book historians, Murnane's texts materialise only as 'scattered impressions, or images which have a hazardous existence in the reader's mind' (152). Dutifully toeing these interpretative lines, he is more-or-less (despite his gender) Murnane's ideal reader. We might then say that Indyk has successfully circumnavigated the pitfall into which the personage narrating *A History of Books* notes with regret that his younger self occasionally stumbled: the latter rues having ever supposed that one 'ought to read fiction for some purpose other than to wait during the hours or the days after his reading for the appearance in his mind of images never previously read about or written about' (59). But the issue with Indyk's reading, and for this reader the shortcoming of *A History of Books* as a whole, is that this is a directive worth ignoring. Murnane's depoliticised, dehistoricised references to the images conjured by half-remembered or unread texts enact the logic of his equation, in 'The Still-Breathing Author,' of 'Meaning'

with ‘*connection*’ (167): in ‘The Interior of Gaaldine’ and elsewhere he takes this to an extreme, reducing books to mere word-ciphers by deploying them as stimuli for his imagined horse-races (154). In doing so, he performs what is less a convincing critique of the material text—its shallowness is clear in comparison, for instance, with Walter Benn Michaels’s resistance to the redescription of text as object in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004)—than an unusual illustration of what the latter refers to as the posthistorical ‘fantasy of meaning without representation’ (123). If we don’t draw a distinction between what we’d like to think a book is about and what it actually represents, it can mean anything we want it to, or whatever we happen to connect it with, or even nothing at all. Which is probably why, after misconstruing meaning as merely connection, the implied author of *A History of Books* finally finds little point in reading or re-reading. Why would he, when he could stop reading and make his own connections, and of them weave his true fiction, those ‘detailed report[s] of certain of the contents of [his] mind’ (164)? And why would we, when meaning-as-connection doesn’t require us to consider the act of representation when reading, only to follow whatever links we happen to make in our own minds? If we try to read Murnane’s novels like Murnane claims to read other books, or like his student of sentences would, then we may end up not bothering to read them at all. Fortunately, although they are all politely diplomatic in his presence, most of the contributors to *Another World in This One* are still concerned with what Murnane’s fiction means. What Murnane needs now are readers who will draw meaning from his books until the former screams for mercy; what he needs is an even more zealous pack of torturers.

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NOTES

¹ A recording of this talk is available via the Writing and Society Research Centre’s YouTube page here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qOUsQaYLU&ab_channel=TheWritingandSocietyResearchCentre

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