

Rebecca Waese. *When Novels Perform History: Dramatizing the Past in Australian and Canadian Literature*. Peter Lang, 2017. ([Cultural History and Literary Imagination](#), Vol. 28) 264 + viii pages.

AUS\$120.46

ISBN 9781906165840; ePub: 9781787078338

The title of Rebecca Waese's book, *When Novels Perform History: Dramatizing the Past in Australian and Canadian Literature* (2017) pretty much explains what the work sets out to do. *When Novels Perform History* consists of a series of readings of selected novels that, on their own, generally support the claims made about the way some works of fiction foreground the power and effect of drama and performance to complicate, revise or reimagine the past as recorded in settler colonies. In Waese's own words, she explores how '[d]ramatic modes of fiction about the past often heighten perceptions of immediacy and sensory awareness by creating a sense of immersion or embodiment in a particular historical scene' (1). Apart from the Introduction, there are six chapters alternating between Australian and Canadian novels.

For Waese, how each writer engages any number of dramatic conventions to create a level of intimacy between reader and characters is key to the subversion of established historical truths in settler societies like Australia and Canada. Readers are drawn into a text, as it were, so that by being made to inhabit its time and place they can relive, reflect on and revise historical narratives and viewpoints. She writes, in her analysis of Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*: 'In this case, a scene is not performed *for* the reader's passive entertainment, but rather the reader is engaged in dramatic enactment through the second-person narrative and the invitation to embody a physical poetics' (147, emphasis in original). And again: 'One of the novel's most effective dramatic strategies of connecting history to the present is the way in which Annie positions the reader in multiple roles using second-person narration' (150).

In an observation that relates explicitly to her reading of Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, but that is equally pertinent to Waese's analyses of other novels, she writes: 'The novel uses language because it must, but draws on other artistic forms to develop alternate modes of expression that speak extra-linguistically' (170). Although clumsily stated, and the immediate excursus on Samuel Beckett that follows does not exactly help, by this stage in the book it is reasonably clear what Waese is after. As she asserts: 'While Beckett, Iser and Brecht may not be typical writers to draw upon in a study of postcolonial history in postmodern fiction, their work is preoccupied with meaning that extends beyond that which can be represented on a textual level alone' (170). *When Novels Perform History* examines the more or less obvious, variously effective ways in which each novel exposes readers to different ways of seeing, knowing and being in the world by taking them back in time and place. Again, here this is done in the context of works by settler and Indigenous or First Nation authors who address themselves to the weight of colonial and postcolonial history.

In her discussion of Australian author David Musgrave's *Glissando: A Melodrama*, Waese asserts:

Musgrave's *Glissando* employs music, melodrama, and Menippean satire in the task of making affective, satirical, and compelling connections between readers and the text in its multi-pronged effort to imagine the history of Australia 'into being yet again.' The novel presents a variety of innovative and stylized genres that are used to develop the art of memory in fiction. *Glissando* acknowledges

the limitations of historical representation in fiction, showing traits of postcolonial self-reflexivity, in its exaggerated Menippean satirical episodes that illuminate certain Australian hypocrisies and shortcomings. It engages with melodramatic revelations, emotional depths and excesses, and stylized conventions that signal a loss of innocence and tension between hope and despair that Musgrave suggests are central to the Australian context at the beginning of the twentieth century. Musgrave finds ways to harness the power of classic forms of satire and melodrama from earlier times and contemporize them with postmodern self-reflexivity and a critical awareness of postcolonial issues. (61)

The passage perfectly encapsulates Waese's thesis but also a level of repetition, at times almost continuously in the same paragraph or on the same page, that betrays a somewhat underdeveloped thesis. Waese's understanding of history as a discipline comes across as rather static, as reflected in the following assertion: 'While historians generally aim to erase their fingerprints from their written accounts of history, Marlatt uses a dramatic mode in her novel to illustrate that an objective distance when animating history in fiction is unattainable and undesirable' (149). For a study working with and out of a concern with postcolonial knowledge, history and history writing as Waese deploys them are dated and almost unrecognisable.

History is treated in the book as if it were something discrete from the world we inhabit. Indeed, much is made of the above claim re history and fiction as something the *book* seeks to do but each chapter becomes almost entirely self-contained, forming a series of variously persuasive readings of the selected novels. The argument is made primarily by assertion rather than careful demonstration, and unfortunately frequent repetition of what the book will do, aims to do or is doing only calls attention to this. Greater focus on the *comparative* potential of a reading of novels from two settler colonies might have alleviated this aspect and in turn alerted the writer to the rich tapestry of resonances between the selected novels. It might also have led the writer to think through the overall approach to the diverse body of texts in more productive ways. An example from the works read by Waese: Canadian Daphne Marlatt's metacritical narrative framework in *Ana Historic* and Australian Peter Carey's approach in *Illywhacker*. It should be stressed too that fiction writers are not necessarily any more credible than historians, something that seems to go missing in the discussion of some novels.

Structurally, the decision to draw on discrete critical material for each chapter, from a cast of a thousand theories and theorists, means that too long is spent on them, especially when the discussion of the novel does not make very clear how vital they are. Consequently, passages in a novel noted as relevant to illustrate a point are cursorily introduced and then dropped as the work of yet another critic is introduced. These critics or theorists are drawn from the world of theatre, occasionally cinema or music, and while frequently some enrich the analyses, others simply take up time and space. In some cases, moreover, while their ideas might have provided an appropriate tool or lens with which to unpick a novelist's approach to fiction, history and truth-telling, Waese rarely pauses sufficiently long to do either critic or novelist full justice. This leads to simplistic assertions such as seeing Kristeva's notion of intertextuality as akin to Jakobson's intersemiotic translation (139), or the comment that a novel 'concludes with a cluster of endings that resist conclusion' (158). Elsewhere we read that, 'Like all fish stories, Sid Hammet's re-constructed version is impossible to trust' (163), when a more patient discussion of the art of representation in fiction was called for. The thrust is there when Waese brings into play Flanagan's insistence on the exceptionalism of representing Tasmania, though even then an opportunity to consider the urge to define Tasmania as always outside the norm of Australian colonialism and colonial oppression might also merit attention.

Despite these misgivings however I really enjoyed the book, essentially because the critical analysis of the novels is always engaged and generous. Waese is very good at highlighting speaking positions and epistemic viewpoints in each work. The readings are also informed by extensive research, particularly on each novel. The Canadian novels are uniquely well-handled, and Waese seemed at her strongest when dealing with the writing of the selected First Nation Canadian authors included here. The chapters on Thomson Highway, but also on Australian writers Tara June Winch and Alexis Wright project a subtle grasp of primary and secondary sources. There is a texture, and an authenticity, to the analytical and critical treatment of the readings of these novels that speaks of the potential for a much stronger book, even if the treatment of the selected Australian novels is not as original. A more focused selection of secondary material, notably critical and theoretical works would have allowed for a more cohesive and coherent structure for the study. Trite, I know, but very much a case of less is more.

Tony Simoes da Silva, UNSW Canberra