

Brendan McNamee. *Grounded Visionary: The Mystic Fictions of Gerald Murnane*. Peter Lang, 2019. 254 pages. US\$104.45 ISBN: 9781433164712 (print); 9781433164729 (ebook); 9781433164736 (epub).

A rare task more difficult than reviewing a book by Gerald Murnane, might be reviewing a critical account encompassing most of Murnane's *oeuvre*. Not that I subscribe to the regularly expressed view that Murnane is 'difficult.' Indeed, overall, his novels—while being admittedly daunting when encountered for the first time—are quite straightforward once the reader finds the measure of the writer's style, tenor and range. But reviewers and critics have often struck trouble in trying to fulfil their role of describing the key elements of Murnane's fiction to unfamiliar readers. This is because there is an undeniable intricacy to his fiction, which demands to be addressed, and in so far as possible explained or described. That 'intricacy' is present in the stylistic surface of Murnane's conspicuously polished prose; in the constant flux between his fictional bedrock and the metafictional superstructure; and in the substantive content provided by his tangled thematic and imagistic obsessions. Indeed, it is the remarkable degree to which style, method and substance are interwoven that occasionally results in Murnane's fiction perplexing even his most dedicated readers. As Brendan McNamee concedes at one point in *Grounded Visionary*, there is a notoriously challenging section of Murnane's *Inland* that leaves him lamenting, 'The point of which, if there is any, escapes me entirely' (92).

Nonetheless, as Murnane's avid readers and admirers appreciate, engaging with his fiction can be both hugely rewarding and great 'fun.' By which I mean it can be approached as an intriguing literary exercise, an important aspect of which is Murnane's manner in challenging all sorts of boundaries—between fiction and reality; image and word; author and reader; and between the interior monologues and exterior 'realities' that constitute the basis from which (in Murnanean terms) the 'breathing author' attempts to write 'true fiction.' So it is worth saying at the outset that a great success of McNamee's approach in *Grounded Visionary* is that he totally 'gets,' and engages with, the intellectual stratagems involved in reading Murnane on the author's own terms.

Readers of Australian fiction will likely be aware of Murnane's career trajectory and current status. This consists of the productive early years, attracting numerous positive reviews and some rusted-on admirers; the mid-career fallow period that seemed likely to be permanent; and the late reinvigoration encouraged by some influential international supporters and a supportive Australian publisher. In addition, the years have produced a persistent trickle of suggestions that he might follow Patrick White and J. M. Coetzee by becoming an Australian Nobel laureate. It is a career that has spanned nearly half a century, and despite the ups and downs it has hardly been met, despite what Murnane himself sometimes suggests, with critical disinterest. In this context it is relevant that McNamee works from Ireland and is therefore one of those international supporters who have done so much to maintain interest in Murnane during the 'quiet' times. It is also notable that this is only the third monograph dedicated to Murnane's work, and that the previous two (by Australian Imre Salusinszky in 1993 and Swede Harald Fawkner in 2006) were both comparatively slender volumes and published prior to Murnane's late career resurgence.

McNamee addresses Murnane's body of work chronologically, although there are some complexities in adhering to an entirely time-bound sequence. For example, the discussion of *A*

Season on Earth appears as the second chapter—although *A Season* was published as recently as 2019—because most of it was written years earlier and subsumes what was Murnane’s second published novel, *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976). A similar principle applies to the sixth chapter, which is given over to *Stream System* (2018), a U.S. published title that collected Murnane’s short stories that originally appeared in two Australian collections—*Velvet Waters* (1990), and *Emerald Blue* (1995).

Another challenge for critics and editors emerges in the degree to which Murnane’s writing often defies standard categories to the extent that it is difficult to put boundaries around what constitutes his ‘fiction.’ Some ‘stories’ have appeared firstly as short fiction, but then reappeared in *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* (2005), which is usually described as a collection of non-fiction essays, and is omitted by McNamee on that basis. And such is Murnane’s blurring of conventional forms, that arguably McNamee might also have included a discussion of *Something for the Pain* (2015), a typically idiosyncratic memoir in which Murnane characteristically collapses the space between autobiography and (his) fiction.

A potential reader picking up *Grounded Visionary* may also wonder what is implied by the sub-title’s reference to ‘mystic fictions.’ This is explained by McNamee in an introduction that refers to literature addressing the ‘mystical foundation of all the world’s religious and spiritual systems’ (1). Certainly, as McNamee explains, there is no avoiding the constant reiteration of a deep yearning in Murnane’s fiction that is often linked to his formational Catholicism. Even a casual reading reveals the extent to which the author compulsively uses what McNamee describes as ‘his artistic holy trinity [of] images-feelings-words’ (1) to explore the mystical parameters of his self-being.

McNamee’s argument in *Grounded Visionary* is that this quest underpins and unifies Murnane’s body of work and provides it with both its most distinctive qualities and indeed its significance. But this need not cause any concern for the mystically (or religiously) squeamish. McNamee concludes that ‘One of the many beauties of Murnane’s writing is that it points in no direction *beyond* that sense of silent mystery itself’ (242), and McNamee’s own approach to the mystical is as agenda-free as he finds Murnane’s fiction.

It is another characteristic of Murnane’s mystical yearning that it is so resolutely singular and self-centred. In this regard it is also notable that McNamee constantly brings to his analytical task his own presence as a reader and critic—it is uncommon to come across ‘I ...’ in a work of literary criticism with anything like the frequency one does here. But this does seem appropriate and even necessary when writing about Murnane, whose fictional representation of an intensely personal worldview in turn generates very individualised responses. McNamee argues this is because literature, when done by the greats, is a personally distinctive space where ‘art and mysticism are on the same quest,’ and which by its nature must be both unresolved in itself, and open to multiple readings.

... some of the best literature has that mysterious baffling quality—Kafka, Beckett, Borges, Murnane—and ... all such literature lends itself to a myriad of interpretations, all of which (including this one) will ultimately fall short, however insightful and intriguing they may be. They fall short simply by virtue of being interpretations. (38)

And as this passage indicates McNamee is prepared to match Murnane’s densely metafictional approach to writing fiction, with his own ‘meta-critical’ approach to criticism. This isn’t,

however—in case you were wondering—in any way distracting or annoying. To this reader it became integral to McNamee’s engagingly discursive manner, whereby he actively and perhaps self-consciously reflects the position inevitably occupied by Murnane’s readers as they grapple with texts that are constantly reflexive and self-referential about the act of writing fiction, and the relationship between author-character-reader. McNamee, by being similarly reflexive about the challenges that he faces as a critic, begins to diffuse the ‘threat’ of reading Murnane.

It is also relevant that McNamee is thoroughly alert to, and knowledgeable about the rich communication, almost to the point of a conscious inter-textuality, that exists between Murnane’s fictions. The reading of any one of Murnane’s books is enriched by familiarity with others, and *Grounded Visionary* brings McNamee’s deep knowledge in this regard to the page. Time and again he succeeds in gently leading the reader through texts in a manner which surprises, enlightens, and entertains, as he demonstrates how Murnane’s web of ‘images-feelings-words’ has been stitched together over five decades and a dozen books to produce one of the most telling bodies of fiction of our time. Whether or not a reader totally buys into McNamee’s foregrounding of the concept of ‘mystic fictions,’ there is still much to be learnt from this book. Not only about Murnane and the art of fiction, but also about the skill of writing approachable criticism.

Grounded Visionary is a fine example of the sort of work a single-author study can do. If Gerald Murnane’s brand of genius is to receive its full recognition, it will not only be because of the author’s authentic and insistent representation of the nature of *his* purpose, but also because someone with McNamee’s acumen can see and describe it for what it is. In doing so McNamee also reflects the thrill as a reader encounters words assembled in such a way that he or she is brought closer to *their* purpose. These are reasons to be thankful.

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