

# **Introduction: Common Readers and Cultural Critics**

MONIQUE ROONEY and RUSSELL SMITH  
Australian National University

The essays collected in this special edition of JASAL were originally presented at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, held at the Australian National University, Canberra, in July 2009, convened by Julieanne Lamond, Lucy Neave, Monique Rooney and Russell Smith. The theme of the conference, ‘Common Readers and Cultural Critics’, aimed to explore the relationship between critical reading, as practiced in educational institutions or as performed in specialised journals, and the broad diversity of reading publics. In particular, the conference called for participants to reflect on the way in which literary cultures are characterised by tensions between various kinds of specialised elites and broader collective processes of discernment, appreciation and canonisation, between reading privately and reading professionally, reading for knowledge and reading for pleasure.

Virginia Woolf is a writer often associated with an elite and exclusive literary coterie, one that defined itself against the populist imperatives of mass commercial culture. Yet her book *The Common Reader* is notable for the way it explores the tensions between established readers (canonical authors and literary critics) and the broader practice of reading in an age of technological change. In the final essay of the collection, ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’, Woolf asks how canonical authority relates to everyday reading. She argues that literary writers enact a desire for incorporation into a literary genealogy or tradition, and that this sits uneasily with a competing desire to reject tradition in order to innovate, to understand and situate oneself in one’s own present moment. Woolf also refers to the arbitrary nature of criticism in her own time, when, she argues, the same work can be ‘declared a masterpiece of English prose’ by one critic and declared, by another, a ‘mere mass of waste-paper which, if the fire could survive it, should be thrown upon the flames’ (Woolf 292). Woolf’s anxiety here is that, in an age of mass production, not only literary fiction but literary criticism has lost a stable sense of authority or meaning. She argues that it is not only new modes of production but also technological innovations that have destabilised notions of literary value itself. While the essay is not entirely antagonistic to cultural change—at one point she refers to how ‘the telephone, which interrupts the most serious conversations and cuts short the most weighty observations [...] has a romance of its own’ (298)—its concern is that neither writers nor critics are, in the moment in which she writes, certain of the value of the literary. This and the following statement confirm Loren Glass’s argument that mass culture was a source of anxiety but also an enabling condition for the exclusive aestheticism of literary modernists:

We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale—the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages—has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. (299)

These reflections on the contingent and unstable nature of literary production and appreciation conclude a book that includes criticism of a tradition of ‘English’ writing ranging from Chaucer through to Conrad. While Woolf’s literary criticism appears to uphold traditional hierarchies and canon formations, the last paragraph of the book suggests that any act of reading is necessarily contingent and provisional, and, in the light of this, gestures towards a more inclusive and collective understanding of the literary field:

As for the critics whose task it is to pass judgement upon the books of the moment, whose work, let us admit, is difficult, dangerous, even distasteful, let us ask them to be generous of encouragement, but sparing of those wreaths and coronets which are so apt to get awry, and fade, and make the wearers, in six months’ time, look a little ridiculous. Let them take a wider, less personal view of modern literature, and look upon the writers as if they were engaged upon some vast building, which being built by common effort, the separate workmen may well remain anonymous. (304)

The essays collected in this issue provide diverse ways of thinking about reading, writing and criticism in an early twenty-first century context in which debates about the nature and function of the literary have, since the time of Woolf’s writing, undergone profound shifts. In the present moment, social media and other digital communications allowing instantaneous communication across vast distances and the formation of intimate networks across international borders are shaping reading and writing practices in rapidly evolving and unpredictable ways.

Restricted to an Anglophile heritage, Woolf’s *The Common Reader* can nevertheless be understood as both a meditation on and a performative instance of what Ken Gelder refers to as ‘literary sociality’, or ‘the relations between readers, texts and the meanings that bind these together’. In his essay ‘Proximate Reading: Australian Literature in Transnational Frameworks’, Gelder argues that the practice of what he calls ‘proximate’ reading is a way of enacting a relation to a text. Proximate comes from the Latin *proximare*, to approach something, to be near or neighbourly. But, as Gelder writes, ‘one cannot be one’s neighbour ... the best one can offer here is something close to an approximation’, suggesting that as readers we are necessarily removed from that intimacy implied and perhaps promised by the critical legacy of ‘close reading’. Within a framework in which national borders have become more porous, Gelder argues that tropes of proximity and distance become an important figure for discursive mobility, and that citations are expressions of proximity that enable networking between writers and readers, texts and their intertexts, mentors and fledgling authors. In making this argument, Gelder lucidly analyses and brings together an eclectic range of contemporary texts that perform various kinds of proximate reading, citation and literary sociality. From Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) to Julia Leigh’s *Disquiet* (2008), and from Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* to Nam Le’s *The Boat* (2008), Gelder’s essay illuminates the possibilities and limits of reading proximately in a complex, globalised environment.

The affective relation between critic and reader is central to Fiona Morrison’s essay, ‘The Quality of “Life”’: Dorothy Hewett’s Literary Criticism’, which focuses on the non-fiction output of Dorothy Hewett, a writer usually more celebrated as a

playwright and poet. Morrison sees an inherent paradox at work in Hewett's non-fiction essays, written between 1945 and 1969, which speaks to her multiple and often contradictory positions as socialist, political activist and literary writer. As Morrison eloquently shows us, Hewett as a writer identified strongly with an expressive, Romantic literary tradition. She was particularly influenced by a Lawrentian idea of 'life' as a force that animated the writer's passionate and imaginative belief in the senses and the sensuous. Hewett's romantic individualism paradoxically informed an interest in social realism, and her literary criticism brought together these two, often incompatible, elements of her politics and her writing. Hewett was a writer of social problems and, in her early career, a committed Communist, but she believed first and foremost in the importance of the imaginative impulse in shaping a writer's relationship to her environment. This anti-doctrinaire position affected her readings of the work and activism of her own socialist peers, and especially, as Morrison poignantly notes, the work of Katharine Susannah Prichard.

If there is a tension between politics and aesthetics in Hewett's literary criticism, Duncan Hose's essay 'Instruction for an Ideal Australian: John Forbes's Poetry of Metaphysical Etiquette' argues that politics and aesthetics are very much two sides of the same coinage in Forbes's insouciant brand of *Kulturkritik*, a poststructuralist noodling on anything and everything that consumer culture offers us, from Adorno to Alka Seltzer. Hose demonstrates the rigorous materialism of Forbes's thinking, which proceeds from, and demands, an attention to surface, texture, to the seduction of the commodity and the hedonist pleasure of its disposable plasticity. There is no romantic self at the core of Forbes's politics or his poetry, but what Hose calls a 'transductive surface', a model of interiority as no more than an assemblage of labels, jingles, slogans and clichés, a plane of consistency sustained by mythologies of personhood and nationhood. And, all the while, the whole metaphysical metanarrative is sardonically held up to examination by a poetry 'topical and democratising in its effects and cynicism, and charming in its insistency on a critical consciousness'.

Brigitta Olubas's 'Shirley Hazzard's Australia: Belated Reading and Cultural Mobility' counters critics of Shirley Hazzard who have interpreted her expatriate take on Australian culture as outdated and provincial. Olubas argues that such attacks on Hazzard's writing as either 'retrograde' or 'recidivist' mask a thinly-veiled misogyny among 'nationalist' scholars who fall back on class and/or postcolonial critique. In countering such responses to Hazzard, Olubas draws on cosmopolitanism as a theory that circumvents nationalist readings, by critically reconfiguring local considerations of Australia via its position in internationalist contexts, and by paying attention to the temporal lag attending considerations of such a positionality. In doing so, Olubas highlights the temporal narrative logic at work in Hazzard's fiction as well as her use of the rhetorical figures of *onto-genesis* and *translatio* that complicate pure or unmediated access to history. She argues that Hazzard's 'frameworks of selfhood and interiority speak to a larger order of time', informing a cosmopolitanism that 'takes shape as an account of contemporary world informed by outmoded sense of its limits and frames'.

In 'We Call Upon the Author to Explain: Theorising Writers' Festivals as Sites of Contemporary Public Culture', Cori Stewart riffs on a Nick Cave lyric to think about the importance of writers' festivals for helping us to understand the commercial and civic function of the literary. Drawing on Habermas and other theorists of intellectual

life and the public sphere, Stewart's essay emphasises the importance of the festival for widening debate about literature beyond the realm of aesthetics and individualised or personalised notions of literary sensibility. Through an analysis of writerly debates and performances that took place at the 2007 Brisbane Writers' Festival, Stewart draws attention to the work that celebration of 'the literary' does in four arenas of public discourse: the politics of place (in this case Brisbane); current political controversies (generated around Palestinian writer Abdel Bari Atwan); the media and political partisanship surrounding 'the literary'; and the role of celebrity in the public sphere.

Keri Glastonbury's 'The New "Coterie": Writing, Community and Collective' explores literary production in the era of social networking, arguing for the centrality of a non-elite 'coterie' in the formation of small-scale literary communities. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of a 'minor literature', Glastonbury emphasises the collective forms of knowledge that are shaping writers of zines, blogs, graphic novels, comics and online poetry. She also points to the ways in which new social and technological conditions—such as the more 'provincialised and provisional' forms of social networking, small-scale production, real-time access and the expanding size of the author-class—are helping to break down romantic ideas of the author as a solitary, autonomous figure.

In 'Reading, Modernity and the Mental Life of Savages', Ian Henderson proposes a view of modern 'reading' that is shaped by a preoccupation with the physiology and psychology of reading itself. Incorporating an eclectic range of readers and texts, from the late nineteenth-century scientists of reading to Sigmund Freud to Rolf de Heer's and Peter Djiggir's film *Ten Canoes* (2006), Henderson draws connections between theorisations of human perception and 'evolutionary' preconceptions about Aboriginal Australians. For moderns, Henderson argues, reading was divided between two mental components: projection (understood as primitive) and perception (associated with advanced stages of development). Henderson argues that encounters with Australian Aborigines—categorised as the most 'savage on earth' at the same time as they were the object of anthropological studies that were informed by ideas of evolutionary progress or enlightenment—stage an encounter between these two aspects of the modern theory of reading.

Jen Webb's 'Distant Context, Local Colour: Australian "post September 11" Fiction' takes as axiomatic the view that the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001 represented an historical break when it comes to how contemporary writers imagine current political scene. Using Jonathan Franzen's declaration of a 'literature of emergency' and John Frow's essay 'UnAustralia' as her departure points, Webb analyses Andrew McGahan's *Underground* and Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* as examples of 'post September 11' novels. Webb argues that these novels represent not a radical new aesthetics (indeed she proposes they both rely on clichéd characterisations and/or hackneyed plots), nor do they pose a revolutionary politics or a historical break with the past. Rather, these texts, Webb argues, explore and thematise the new political territory opened up by September 11: the social and political restrictions on civil rights enabled by the passing of the National Security Bill and the Australian government's complicity in new regimes of power and surveillance.

In ‘Australia and its German-Speaking Readers: A Study of How German Publishers Have Imagined Their Readers of Australian Literature’, Oliver Haag analyses a large sample of Australian book covers that have been marketed to a German-speaking readership. Following Gerard Genette’s inclusion of book covers as exemplary peritexts—those texts that ‘surround’ the actual literary text—Haag tracks changes in the production and reception of Australian fiction in the German-speaking market. Haag argues that such an analysis can tell us how German publishers envision German-speaking readers of Australian fiction and, in turn, how those readers imagine Australia within an international literary space. Haag’s study shows how, from the early through to the later years of the twentieth century, publishers have continued to cater to popular and touristic imaginings of Australia as a wild place of adventure and romance, but also, in a more specific response to local German conditions, to Australia as the locus of socialist possibility. In more recent decades, however, publishers have narrowed their marketing focus, creating more specialised book covers that target female readers and/or readerships craving ‘erudite’ fiction.

*The True History of the Kelly Gang* is, as Victoria Reeve’s astute essay reveals, a deceptively complicated text in which Peter Carey manipulates narrative voice to depict his mythic folklore hero in contradictory ways. Reeve analyses what she argues are the ‘competing’ and ‘contradictory’ cultural voices that are evoked through Carey’s polyphonic and grammatical narrative shifts. Her essay demonstrates how the novel’s central point of view only *appears* to be made immediate and present through the first-person perspective of Ned Kelly. In tension with this voice is Carey’s use of another subjective position that both speaks through and distances itself from the Kelly who speaks. What this does, Reeve argues, is problematically stage presence through a narrative style that announces itself as a cultural construction. This technique both clarifies and disrupts assumptions about the speaking voice as the manifestation of naturalised presence and, in turn, destabilises the novel’s otherwise nostalgic or mythologising tendencies.

The issue closes with Nina Puren’s powerful essay, ‘Reading Rape in Colonial Australia: Barbara Baynton’s “The Tramp”, *The Bulletin* and Cultural Criticism’, which sheds light on the ways in which ‘critical’ cultures can perpetuate common myths. Barbara Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ (originally published as ‘The Tramp’)—a short story that has played an important role in debates about feminism and nineteenth-century Australian literary culture—was submitted to *Bulletin* literary editor, A. G. Stephens in the midst of the incendiary debate surrounding the Mount Rennie rape case of 1886-87. Puren takes an unflinching look at the masculinist outrage, aired in newspapers at the time of the sensational trial, and after the defendants accused of gang-raping Mary Jane Hicks were convicted as charged, through which the rape of a woman was ‘re-figured as a crime against men’, as a ‘reminder of the danger of accepting a woman’s word about rape’, and as ‘an exemplary instance of the injustice of colonial law’. Puren then shows how Baynton’s story unsettles such colonial myths about rape through its depiction of violence both outside and within the familiar realm of the home. Baynton’s fictional victim is not only subject to the menace of the story’s obvious rapist—its eponymous ‘tramp’, whom she argues can be too easily categorised as a monstrous exception—but also to her husband’s sadistic violence. That the latter, a commonplace representative of patriarchal law, is capable of violence against his wife suggests Baynton’s simultaneous concealment and exposure of the colonial woman as doubly victimised.

Here Puren demonstrates literature's 'power to disrupt the transmission of the very cultural stories with which it is engaged'.

WORKS CITED

Glass, Loren. *Authors Inc: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980*. New York: New York UP, 2004.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader*. London: Hogarth Press, 1948.