

Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon, eds. *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012, 301 pp.

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While politicians often use the term ‘community’ to evoke consensus, this absorbing collection of essays reminds us that any community—literary or otherwise—is an ongoing negotiation between diverse identities and interests. *Republics of Letters* examines the role of literary communities, or ‘literary sociability’, in Australian culture. Its editors, Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon, seek to shift our attention from ‘individual writers and great books’ to ‘the various forms of community that... sustain writing and reading,’ as well as ‘the kinds of communal identities... formed by the practices of writing and reading’ (v). *Republics of Letters* explores a wide range of literary communities, including local libraries, theatre audiences and the readerships of women’s magazines. At the same time, it grapples with the notion of ‘world literature’ and its meaning for Australian literary studies. While it alludes frequently to Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, this book presents a far more pluralistic vision of literary community. Building on Casanova’s model of an overarching ‘world literary space’, it presents a multiplicity of local, national and transnational communities, each ‘constituted as much by... differenc[e] as by the experience of commonality’ (vii).

If there is a risk posed by this project, it lies in the attempt to juxtapose ‘world literature’ with the very different forms of ‘community’ created by writers’ circles, little magazines and the like. Dixon and Kirkpatrick acknowledge the ‘slippage’ between these two concepts. ‘While the term “community” suggests... shared values and interests,’ they write, ‘the “republic of letters” draws on the language of politics, reminding us that this is a field constituted by power and competition’ (v). Distancing themselves from Casanova’s model, they announce their intention to focus on ‘more local, even avowedly provincial, forms of literary polity... the towns and villages and nomad tribes of the world republic of letters’ (xii). Yet *Republics of Letters* does not simply romanticise the local, or cast ‘world literature’ as inevitably hostile to Australian literary texts. Some essays address the important role of transnational audiences in fostering Australian literature, while others show how local coteries have served to exclude or silence dissenting voices. Their authors consistently avoid Manichean distinctions between the local and the global. They define sociability in both positive and negative terms—as communal, cooperative and enabling, but also hierarchical, competitive and coercive—and argue plausibly that both forms operate on local, national and global scales.

Joan Shelley Rubin emphasises the ambivalent nature of literary sociability, in her witty and elegant opening chapter. A social historian, she adopts a broad definition of ‘text-based’ communities and provides a number of fascinating case studies. Her discussion of American post-war choirs is particularly telling. She describes how in the late 1950s, Howard Hanson adapted two Walt Whitman poems into a choral piece entitled ‘Song of Democracy’. The piece became hugely popular, appearing frequently in the repertoires of ‘all-city high school choruses’ and adult amateur chorales. In this context, Rubin writes, the text acquired distinctly ‘Cold War overtones’, seeming to affirm and promote ‘the hegemony of American capitalism’ (13, 15). By performing the piece, individual singers became complicit in Hanson’s patriotic, politically conservative agenda, regardless of their personal views. They also consigned themselves to a ‘devalued middlebrow status’, earning the contempt of many elite cultural critics. Yet in its sheer popularity, Hanson’s ‘Song of Democracy’ ‘literally... g[ave] voice to ordinary people... bypassing the judgment of academic authorities’ (15). It also ‘created new, if temporary, communities of readers who, in the act of singing, created

shared experiences and memories' (13). With this example, Rubin neatly illustrates how literary sociability can 'support individual autonomy, deference to authority, or both simultaneously' (16).

Rubin's is the first in a group of essays devoted to 'sites of sociability' and 'scenes of reading'. They proceed in roughly chronological order from the period just before Federation to the early 2000s. The essays by Kylie Mirmohamadi and Julianne Lamond are most overtly concerned with notions of an Australian national writing and reading tradition. Mirmohamadi places the Australasian Home Reading Union in the 'overwhelming political context' of the drive to federate Australia's colonies (24). By contrast, Lamond uses library borrowing records to argue that in the early twentieth century, many readers were largely indifferent to a book's 'Australianness'. Using innovative computer modelling, she posits the existence of an 'eclectic', cosmopolitan literary culture in Australia, while at the same time suggesting that there were 'clusters' of readers who were 'unselfconsciously similar' in their reading habits (38, 31). Together with an account of cultural organisations in 1920s Brisbane, and a study of recent books on asylum seeker policy, these chapters suggest many ways in which the notion of literary sociability can enrich Australian literary studies.

The second section takes up the notion of 'world literature' and considers the relation between national literatures and transnational reading practices. Collectively, these essays suggest that 'world literature' need not be a static, hierarchical and exclusive canon, but rather that it is a dynamic concept that allows subtler and more sophisticated readings of Australian texts. Robert Dixon invokes world literature as a fruitful 'mode of reading' that complements national and localised textual analysis. With a 'cross-cultural' take on Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (77), and a provincialised reading of Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest*, he argues that neither text can be read as purely national or purely cosmopolitan. Rather, he suggests, the local, national and transnational are complementary 'frames of reference', none of which has 'absolute jurisdiction' (82). Similarly, David Carter points to a short-lived little magazine, *Desiderata*, to show that in the 1930s, Australian texts operated within a 'complex network' of transnational referents. In this period, he argues, British culture functioned not as a 'thwarting, constraining force', but rather as link to transnational modernist culture (91). Equally compelling essays by Peter Kirkpatrick, Fiona Morrison, Philip Mead, Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel present further, finely nuanced examples of transnational approaches to Australian literary texts. At the same time, they reinforce Dixon's view that the transnational cannot entirely supersede the national, as a framework for reading Australian literature.

With another shift in focus, the third section explores 'the gendering of literary sociality' (xvi). In an essay on Kylie Tennant, Charmian Clift and Barbara Jefferis, Susan Sheridan shows how women's magazines served to 'bridge the gap' between a feminised domestic sphere and a largely masculine public sphere in the 1950s and 60s. She notes that all three writers were ambivalent about this kind of work, which threatened to undermine their 'hard-earned place in the literary field'. Yet through their regular columns, Tennant, Clift and Jefferis created fleeting, 'fragile communit[ies] of women readers and writers' (203) anticipating the more autonomous women's publishing ventures of the 1970s. D'Arcy Randall gives an account of the Canberra-based Seven Writers, the first 'formally organised' (206) and perhaps most successful women writers' group in Australian history. Randall suggests that the all-female nature of the group strongly influenced its 'aesthetic freedom' and collaborative mode of sociability (207).

Yet in keeping with Rubin's stress on the ambivalence of literary sociability, this section also shows how literary communities have excluded women, both as readers and writers.

Discussing the Melbourne staging of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Susan K. Martin notes that very few women attended theatrical melodrama, as it was not thought 'respectable' by middle class women and was too expensive for the rest (175). Randall suggests that Seven Writers formed in response to the gender exclusivity of Canberra's literary scene in the 1970s and 80s. She observes that existing coteries such as the ANU Poets' Picnic were almost entirely male and 'seemed uninviting to young women writers' (212). Moreover, as mothers to young children, the Seven Writers found it hard to participate in literary groupings that centred around pubs. Jane Grant's chapter on Cynthia Reed (later Nolan) and Elisabeth Lambert reinforces this sense of literary community as a potential impediment to female creativity. Grant describes how as young women, both Nolan and Lambert struggled to gain a foothold in the Melbourne artistic milieu of Heide. Both women eventually forged successful careers overseas, and Grant's essay is valuable merely in attempting to reintegrate them into the history of Australian modernism. More important, however, is her critique of Heide as precious and ego-driven, dominated by the wealthy John and Sunday Reed. In contrast to popular perceptions of Heide as a communal, libertarian space, Grant presents it as a hostile environment for women who were 'disinclined to be told what to think' (188).

The book's fourth section on 'emerging communities' is, perhaps inevitably, the most heterogeneous. While lacking the focus and cohesion of previous sections, it presents several interesting examples of literary sociability. These include gay and lesbian poetry anthologies, 'aberrant' or anomalous texts (228), online groups of 'emerging writers' and immigrant memoirs—specifically, *They're a Weird Mob*, published by John O'Grady under the pseudonym Nino Culotta. It ends strongly with poet Bonny Cassidy's dreamlike account of a journey from outback New South Wales to South Australia. Contemplating the landscape and its 'shifting shapes', Cassidy reflects that 'literature works that way: its connections and communities of ideas, works, eyes, hands and sounds... just malleable elements' (278).

Cassidy's piece is a fitting conclusion to a book that subtly explores the relationship between literature and geography. Place is a recurring theme in *Republics of Letters*. Mirmohamadi is the first to address it explicitly. She writes that by promoting outdoor reading as a common and desirable practice, the Australasian Home Reading Union 'allowed the rural Australian landscape to be re-imagined... as a site of literary experience' (21). Philip Mead reprises this theme, discussing the 'fictional geography' of Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* and the 'provincial cosmology' of John Kinsella's *Divine Comedy* (147, 153). In a much more literal vein, Grant points out that the physical distance between Adelaide and Melbourne was a major obstacle to the publishing partnership between Max Harris and John Reed. Randall considers Canberra's image as a 'soulless', even 'uncanny' location, and argues that this 'repellent myth' served as a stimulating challenge to the Seven Writers group (213-216). This recurring engagement with geography creates a vivid sense of Australian literary communities 'in place' (20), profoundly influenced and sometimes constrained by their physical location.

Another strength of this collection is its adoption of new methodologies, previously unexplored sources and new forms of textual production. Lamond's use of library records is particularly exciting, though perhaps her graph would have been easier to read in a colour reproduction (the same could be said of Fred Williams' *You Yangs Landscape*, which appears in Cassidy's piece). Grant's essay identifies the papers of Reed & Harris as the rich archive of a 'far-flung epistolary community', deserving further study (194). Lachlan Brown's essay, on the creative writing of young refugees, attests that unique forms of literary sociality continue to emerge in Australia.

The editors of *Republics of Letters* have set out 'to explore the notion of literary community or literary sociability in a thematic and comprehensive way' (v). For the most part they have succeeded. The themes of the first and fourth sections are rather loosely defined and there are some essays that do not fit neatly into the book's four-part structure. Still, given the essays' provenance as conference papers, they show a surprising degree of complementarity and thematic coherence. By grouping them into sections, Dixon and Kirkpatrick underscore parallels between seemingly disparate topics—between, for example, Rubin's amateur chorales and the Australasian Home Reading Union. The discrete section on gender is especially useful, as it highlights the ways in which literary communities serve to exclude, as well as include, readers and writers. This points to the potential for further work on literary sociability, and literary outsiders, for example in relation to migrant, indigenous and working class literatures in Australia.

In this sense, the editors make good on their promise to 'map out a new field of inquiry in Australian literary history' (vii). *Republics of Letters* certainly suggests that the concept of literary sociability has much to offer Australian literature. It also demonstrates that the notion of 'world literature' need not be antithetical to national literary traditions; rather, that transnational perspectives complement national and localised readings of any text. Indeed the whole collection manifests the "doubled vision" of the comparatist', seeing Australian literature always in relation to its transnational context (73). And despite its stated focus on groups, the book also makes important contributions to the study of many individual writers—whether by recontextualising well-known figures like Christina Stead, or by drawing attention to lesser known writers like Cynthia Nolan and Charmian Clift.

Taken individually, many essays in this book represent scholarship of the highest calibre. As a collection, *Republics of Letters* attests to the suppleness, breadth and vitality of Australian literary studies today.

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