

The Global Reception of Post-national Literary Fiction: The Case of Gerald Murnane

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‘. . . somewhere on the planet Earth there's a book of mine in print, but they're not thick on the ground.’ (Gerald Murnane, interviewed by Ramona Koval)

In recent years a considerable degree of pessimism has been expressed regarding the outlook for Australian literary fiction. Mark Davis, in what is probably the most widely cited discussion of the issue, scrutinised the categories of ‘literary’ and ‘Australian’ and concluded they were both implicated in falling sales and decreased interest from major publishing houses. Davis argued that whereas literature and nationalism coalesced to their mutual advantage at a particular political and cultural moment, they have since fallen victim to a range of technological, economic and regulatory factors. According to Davis:

. . . the literary paradigm can be understood as a particular postwar formation in part driven by the cohort of students that passed through university arts faculties between the 1950s and the 1980s who, armed with Leavisite educations and steeped in the struggles of the post-1950s cultural nationalist moment, became its core audience. (127)

And if being identified as ‘literary’ and ‘Australian’ were seen as problems, then Davis contended that Australian authors were reacting against both categories in their attempt to attract readers. As he put it, “Literary writers have begun to look at ways of reinventing themselves, either taking a more openly popular approach or looking overseas” (130).

David Carter, taking up some of the same themes, reached a more ambivalent conclusion about the future of literary publishing, while also noting the decline of nationalism as a motivator for the production and reception of literary fiction. For Carter,

The most successful Australian literary authors are no longer dependent upon the local publishing industry, not even the local branches or the multinationals for publication. The ‘national’ no longer provides a compelling frame for either consumers or producers... (245)

Carter also echoed Davis’ thoughts about authors adopting a more populist mode by noting the rise of ‘middlebrow’ fiction and its detrimental impact on the literary end of the fiction market.

Novelist and academic Andrew McCann took a more cynical approach to what he describes as the ‘relentless logic of the marketplace’, arguing that the capitulation of literary publishing to the long-reach of global capital and international conglomeration has reduced novelists to the status of bit players in the culture of celebrity. The result,

according to McCann, is literary fiction driven by adherence to ‘the logic of the market’ and therefore increasingly adopting conservative modes, to the point where it has lost its status as ‘a realm of production that was relatively autonomous in respect of other forms of social and cultural practice’ (23).

Shadowing these analyses is the spectre of globalisation—the suggestion that if Australian literary fiction flourished due to a supportive localised readership in the post-war years, then it has found that readership irrevocably altered by an increasing exposure to international fiction and global markets. Certainly, the impacts of globalisation and its associated technologies, economies and cultures are various and complex, with significant implications for the consumption of both literary and genre fiction. Some of the key factors include the increased accessibility of international markets; the acquisition of local publishers by international media and publishing houses; the ubiquity of internet-based book retailers; the increased importance of diasporic audiences; the rise in multilingualism; and the advent of transnational blogging communities.

Davis, Carter and McCann broadly argue that while the effects of globalisation have been beneficial for some types of cultural production, they have left little scope for literary fiction other than in a form compromised by the need to appeal to a mass-market with little appetite for innovation or provocation. Davis and McCann in particular contend that the outlook for literary fiction lies in a belletristic mediocrity. As McCann concludes:

In these [current] circumstances an avant-garde (one even feels foolish writing the word) seems utterly impossible. A literature that attempts to alienate the reader from the pleasures of ‘cultured’ entertainment, or a writing based on montage, on a deliberate attempt not to tell the same old comforting stories of closure, spurious mysticism, self-discovery, or personal reconciliation, all seem perversely counter-intuitive. (24)

It is also possible, however, that some of the effects of globalisation will be supportive of Australian writing and writers, by delivering new audiences for fiction that refuses the blandishments of a mass audience and remains defiantly ‘literary’. That is, the effect of global ‘massing’ is not only to produce a single, undifferentiated audience for internationally popular cultural productions, but also to nurture small, discrete audiences that may not be independently sustainable if left to the vagaries and economics of a local market. The emergence of these niche audiences is aided by the technologies of globalisation, and abetted by the emergence of a ‘post-national’ sensibility in an audience to whom access to global culture is a means of both self-identifying and associating with others who share similar tastes or interests irrespective of their national affiliation. As Chris Anderson—who popularised the concept of the ‘long tail’ to describe the emergence of technology driven, global markets for otherwise marginal products—explained:

Our growing affluence has allowed us to shift from being bargain shoppers buying branded (or even unbranded) commodities to becoming mini-connoisseurs, flexing our taste with a thousand little indulgences that set us apart from others. We now engage in a host of new consumer behaviours

that are described with intentionally oxymoronic terms, ‘massclusivity,’ ‘slivercasting,’ ‘mass customization.’ (11)

In terms of finding a market for literary authors, this suggests that those who suffer from a disinterested, uncomprehending or antagonistic local readership, may nevertheless find their careers and reputations nurtured by the reader numbers that only an international audience can provide.

With these thoughts in mind, this paper will consider the case of Gerald Murnane, a writer of literary fiction who has resolutely refused to make compromises for the sake of expanding his Australian audience, but who nonetheless is finding his career supported and even prolonged by a small but influential international readership. The point of the paper is not to defend Murnane’s reputation, either national or international, but to consider his international reception as an indicator of the possible future of national—or post-national—literary fiction.

MURNANE’S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

When Murnane was awarded a New South Wales Premier’s Special Prize in 2007 the citation noted that ‘his work is better known in Sweden than it is here’ (New South Wales Film and Television Office). And when the Australia Council presented Murnane and Christopher Koch with Emeritus Awards in February 2008, Council Chairman Imre Salusinszky commented that, ‘Both writers have made a great contribution to the imaginative life of this country that is not reflected in sales. Both are more celebrated outside than inside Australia’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*).

Salusinszky’s words encapsulate two observations that are frequently made about Murnane’s work and its reception; that he has poor sales in Australia, and that he is more appreciated elsewhere. Certainly it is the case that Murnane has never had a large readership in Australia. Sometimes glowing reviews and positive critical attention have not transformed into large sales, and publishers have had difficulty in keeping his books in print. Although Murnane’s influence has arguably transcended his low reader numbers, he has never entered the public consciousness in the same way as other writers—such as David Malouf, Peter Carey, Tim Winton or Kate Grenville—who are associated with the literary end of Australian fiction.

The presentations of the New South Wales Premier’s Prize and the Australia Council Emeritus Award are not the only occasions in recent years on which the subject of Murnane’s international reputation has been raised. Firstly, in the course of 2006 it was reported that he was somewhere in the running for a Nobel Prize and being quoted by international gaming house Ladbrokes at odds of 33/1 (Steger). Not the favourite by any means, but the only Australian on the list, and—it should be noted—at shorter odds than those being offered for Salman Rushdie and Umberto Eco. Prizes and awards (and bookmakers odds) are crude barometers for assessing merit or reputation, but in his own country Murnane has been conspicuously absent from the winner’s circle. In addition to the NSW Premier’s Prize and the Australia Council Emeritus Award his other significant ‘win’ has been the 1999 Patrick White Award, which like the other awards is given in recognition of achievement over the course of a career, rather than the more high profile prizes presented for individual works of fiction.

Murnane's international reputation was again foregrounded in late 2007, with the arrival of the US edited and published *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*. The *Companion* included a section titled 'International Reputations', consisting of essays on six authors: Christina Stead, Patrick White, David Malouf, Les Murray, Peter Carey and Murnane. A review of the *Companion* by Peter Pierce appeared in the February 2008 number of *Australian Book Review*. In noting the authors included under the 'international reputations' rubric, Pierce comments that Murnane, 'seems to have his place because of a few passionate local partisans rather than a wide following anywhere' (12). As the author of that chapter I am almost certainly now aligned with these 'local partisans', a phrase which seems to be uncomfortably pejorative, in its use of both 'local' and 'partisans'. It is the case, however, that a number of Murnane's supporters—or partisans if you will—are most certainly *not* local. Indeed in so far as Murnane's inclusion in the *Companion* can be attributed to any one person it is the book's co-editor Nicholas Birns, a US academic and critic and a longstanding admirer of Murnane's fiction.

MURNANE AND POST-NATIONAL FICTION

Gerald Murnane is in some respects an unlikely 'case study' with regard to the state of his international reputation and readership. In one sense at least he is the *most* Australian, and least international, of writers, in that although now seventy, he has never left Australia. Murnane is renowned for his near pathological distaste for travel, and indeed has only infrequently ventured outside of his native Victoria. Therefore unlike those authors who have expatriated or travelled in order to gain personal exposure to international agents, publishers, critics and readers, Murnane has never been in such an advantageous position.

A further yardstick of what might be said to constitute 'Australianness' in an author is the extent to which their writing addresses themes that are thought of as 'Australian'. It hardly needs pointing out that as with other postcolonial nations Australian fiction of the twentieth century drew heavily (as it continues to) on the experience of discovery, settlement, Indigenous contact, expansion, and nation building. It is fiction rooted in local experience of time, space and place, and Australian readers have willingly embraced narratives which addressed their own circumstances.

In this regard Murnane has been somewhat out of step. For although all of his fictions have been set entirely or largely in Australia, many commentators have noted the highly abstracted version of the country that emerges.¹ Murnane's narratives are deeply interior and allegorical, wherein landscape, space and place are all compulsively rendered, but in ways that invite them to be read as refractions of the narrator's own highly individual consciousness. Perhaps typical is the setting of his novella *The Plains*—a place called Inner Australia, which is interior to, but somehow separated from the continent of 'Outer Australia', and the occupants of each eye each other suspiciously across a gulf of incomprehension. One of the 'plainsmen' emerges as a leader when he devises a doctrine that 'denied the existence of any nation with the name Australia':

There was he admitted, a certain legal fiction which plainsmen were sometimes required to observe. But the boundaries of true nations were fixed in the souls of men. And according to the projections of real, that is

spiritual, geography, the plains clearly did not coincide with any pretended land of Australia. (37)

When Egyptian born, US based, and frequently Australian visiting literary theorist Ihab Hassan wrote an essay under the title ‘How Australian is it?’, he tried to identify the essence of what constitutes ‘Australianness’ in a work of fiction. Not surprisingly Hassan was drawn to Murnane, and to *The Plains*, as a focus of his discussion. He responded to Murnane’s fiction in terms of the conflation it achieves between the personal and the universal, and asks what space, if any, this leaves for the national. Hassan concluded that “*The Plains* does not make our query, ‘How Australian is it?’ nugatory; [rather] it radically alters the terms of discourse about it” (36).

The issue of the ‘Australianness’ of Murnane’s fiction was a subject that I felt needed to be addressed in the chapter in the *Companion*. It is not an easy subject, because the question to which it responds—that is, how ‘Australian’ is a work of fiction?—is not only unanswerable, but probably pointless. Nevertheless, in so far as I was arguing for an acceptance of Murnane as being part of some notional Australian canon, this seemed to call for a defence against the proposition that his fiction was somehow unconcerned with ‘Australia. I wrote that:

What . . . is often overlooked in analysis of Murnane’s fiction is the extent to which he embeds his quest for self-discovery in multiple images that resonate with a settler society and therefore convey a rich range of meaning associated with being ‘Australian’. As used by Murnane these images—primarily those associated with landscape, exploration, space, emptiness, home—cohere to produce a remarkable examination of an individual suffering the trauma of exile, with all that term implies for a postcolonial nation. . . . Although Murnane may not consciously write as part of a national literature, his intensely personal fictions paradoxically mobilise issues of nationhood as effectively as those of his contemporaries who have self-consciously mined the seams of the postcolonial state. (302)

This consideration of the nature of the ‘Australianness’ of Murnane’s fiction also serves to inform an understanding of his international reception. For although I would continue to argue that Murnane’s fiction reflects intrinsically his experience of being Australian, it is clear that the author views himself as operating outside of any national framework. Indeed Murnane claims that his self-identity as a ‘plainsman’ constitutes his primary allegiance, to which being Australian is secondary and somewhat incidental. According to Murnane:

I think of myself as a plainsman. I’m serious. I would like my biographer of the future to call his or her book *Plainsman: A Life of Gerald Murnane*. I think of myself as spending most of my waking hours in a library in a large house with a return veranda. The blinds remain drawn down all day in the library. Sometimes I peep around the edges of the blinds. At such times I observe that the large house is surrounded by mostly level grassy countryside with scattered trees in the middle distance. Having observed this I suppose myself to be in some or another part of Australia. (Letter)

Not only does Murnane claim that he is somehow separate from the country of his birth—the country he has never left—but he also refuses to associate his fiction with a national literature. Rather, in so much as he identifies with other novelists it is with a small group of international writers who share a critical element of his art:

I believe the bulk of writers . . . are pretty much of a muchness; they write what are essentially film-scripts, some more subtle than others. A few, a very few, report truly the contents of their minds or they arrange patterns of imagery. I happen to be one of this sort of writer writing in Australia. I would hardly expect to be compared to other Australian writers. (Letter)

It is these ‘patterns of imagery’ to which Murnane refers that impart to his fiction the elements that are, on the one hand, intensely personal and introspective, but which are also likely the key to its potentially international appeal. For while these images may have their genesis in Murnane’s exposure to particular(ly) Australian landscapes and experience, he uses them to forge an intimate account of the acts of knowing, imagining and remembering by which *all* individuals construct their place in the world. It might be argued that Murnane was Australia’s first truly ‘post-national’ fiction writer—an author obsessively interested in aspects of the Australian landscape, but to whom that landscape serves as a gateway to the images that reside deep within his own consciousness rather than as a component of the processes of geo-political annexation and social enculturation by which the nation was formed. And when coupled with the consciously narrated, self-reflexive and metafictional aspects of his meticulously rendered prose, such elements make reading Murnane potentially compelling for those whose tastes run to the theory or practice of postmodern fiction. Such readers are as likely to be international as they are Australian, and crucially international readers will encounter little if anything in Murnane’s fiction that is disturbingly parochial or inaccessibly provincial.

It remains an open-question as to what exactly constitutes ‘post-national’ fiction. At one level the advent of post-nationalism might simply be evidenced by fewer novels focusing on Australia’s colonial or post-colonial formation and an increased engagement with emerging forms of pluralistic nationalism. More specifically, however, the form would almost certainly be said to encompass novels in which the settings are obviously removed from Australia entirely (Rod Jones’ *Billy Sunday*, 1995; Delia Falconer’s *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, 2005; Luke Davies’ *God of Speed*, 2008); or that address the impacts of modernity and globalisation and the associated erosion of a personal or political sensibility aligned to ‘Australia’ (Gail Jones’ *Dreams of Speaking*, 2006; Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*, 2005). In each of these cases, however, it can be argued that the imprint of nationalism remains even when its most obvious forms are conspicuously absent; authors adopting a consciously international or trans-national ‘position’ invariably invoke the uncanny depths of the need to ‘belong’ that typically gives rise to expressions of nationalism. As Hassan suggested, however, Murnane’s fiction frequently takes the reader into an altogether different realm, into that ‘imaginary space between the concreteness of culture and the universality of the human condition’ (36). It is a challenging and sometimes uncomfortable space where the question of the ‘national’—or indeed any other denominator of allegiance—is effectively negated by the will to express the individuality and personality of the authorial imagination.

MURNANE'S INTERNATIONAL READERSHIP

And so to the claim that Murnane is more celebrated outside Australia than within. What is the evidence for this? Firstly, one can look to the publishing history of Murnane's seven works of fiction.

Perhaps unusually for an author with quite limited sales in Australia, Murnane *has* been favoured with international publication and translation. His first novel *Tamarisk Row* was published in a UK paperback edition in 1977, three years after its Australian publication. His third novel, *The Plains*, was published in the US in 1985, again three years after its Australian publication. Murnane notes that, 'Despite excellent publicity, reviews were few, scant, and uncomprehending. I suspect that sales were meagre' (Letter). Notwithstanding this poor reception *The Plains* was published again in the US in 2003 and according to Murnane was 'even less well received than the [previous edition]' (Letter).

Murnane's fifth book, *Inland*, appeared in the UK in both hardback and paperback editions soon after its 1988 Australian publication. Murnane has noted that the only review appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, a review that he described as 'stupid' and 'uncomprehending', and that the sales were 'far from being noteworthy' (Letter).

As for translations, *Velvet Waters (Una Melodia)* was the first to appear in an Italian edition (albeit published in Australia) in 1994. The following year *Inland (Inlandet)* appeared in a Swedish edition, published in Stockholm. Of this Swedish *Inland* Murnane wrote, 'If you assert . . . that the edition ran to no more than two thou[sand] and that it sold slowly, you would be most unlikely to hear an interjection to the contrary' (Letter).

The Plains (Slatterna) was also translated into Swedish, with an edition published in 2005. It appears that it may have sold around 1000 copies in its first year, apparently sufficient to convince the publisher to undertake a translation of *Velvet Waters*, which is still awaiting publication. Scandinavian reviewers have generally been kinder to Murnane than their US and UK counterparts.

So the international publishing scorecard is four novels in eight editions, including translations of three novels in two languages, modest sales, and mixed reviews. It should be noted that the only one of these international publications to appear with the support of a major publishing house (Faber) was the UK edition of the *Inland*. The US editions of *The Plains* were published by a small independent publisher, George Braziller; and New Issues Press, which is affiliated with Western Michigan University and manages a list heavily favouring contemporary poetry.

Murnane claims that this international reception is similar to that which he has received in Australia:

When I started out, more than forty years ago, I sometimes daydreamed about reaching large numbers of readers, but I soon learned that my books appealed to a comparatively small number of persons; perhaps no more than two or three thousand in Australia or in any other country . . .

We're in vague unquantifiable territory here, but it seems to me that my reception in the few overseas places where I have been published is not much different from my reception in my native country. The majority of critics and commentators can't work me out; a minority understand and like me. (Letter)

Murnane's reference to the 'minority' is telling. For while his readership has been small, it has also been the case that in Australia his fiction has—as intimated by Peter Pierce in his reference to 'partisans'—been championed by a series of influential supporters. These have included John Tittensor, in the early days; Peter Craven, both when he was editing *Scripsi* and since; Imre Salusinszky, whose passion for Murnane has been apparent in firstly his academic work, and more recently his writing for the national press; and Ivor Indyk, through his editorial work with *Heat* and Giramondo Press.

This pattern of promotion by individuals has been replicated overseas, where it has arguably been even more important to establishing Murnane's reputation. The key figures have been Nicholas Birns and Andrew Zawacki in the US, and Harald Fawkner, Lars Ahlstrom and Karin Hansson in Scandinavia.²

The Scandinavian interest in Murnane has been the most intriguing and significant development in the international reception of his work. Murnane describes the genesis of this Scandinavian connection as follows:

On a certain morning or afternoon in the late 1980s, a certain man was looking over some books in a bookshop in England. I've sometimes imagined that the books were on a 'remaindered' table. The man was named Harald Fawkner. His father was a Scot and his mother a Norwegian. . . Harald had ended up in Sweden, speaking and writing fluent English and Swedish (and perhaps also Norwegian). Anyway, Harald reacted to *Inland* in a way that still amazes me. He was so impressed by the book that he wrote a book-length appreciation or review or study or critique of the book and sent it to the Melbourne office of the Oxford University Press for possible publication. (Letter)

An Oxford University Press edition never eventuated, as the publisher was already committed to Salusinszky's *Gerald Murnane* which appeared as part of their short lived Australian Authors series. Fawkner's book was eventually published by Stockholm University over a decade later as *Grasses That Have no Fields: From Gerald Murnane's 'Inland' to a Phenomenology of Isogonic Constitution*. These two titles remain the only monographs devoted wholly to Murnane.

It appears to have been in part due to Fawkner's influence that a quite discernible academic interest in Murnane's fiction developed in Scandinavia, and Sweden in particular. His novels have been included on university curricula, which eventually resulted in several PhD theses being written (Posti; Sundin). It is interesting to note that although Murnane has been included as a component of a number of Australian PhDs, there is no evidence that—unlike in Sweden—he has been the focus of a single

author study. It should also be noted that Murnane's Nobel Prize nominations, which have been submitted for a number of years, have also originated in Sweden.

Murnane addressed the matter of his Swedish reputation in an interview with Ramona Koval:

It's an example of how the interest and enthusiasm of a small group of people can spread and can cause other people to open their eyes and look with fresh gaze at things . . . I have three or four people in Sweden who are my constant correspondents, they keep me abreast with what's happening, they also send me the reviews. It's interesting to see that . . . if you seemingly fired a question at reviewer X or reviewer Y, 'Who are the major writers at present in Australia?' According to them, because they look at Australia with a different set of eyes from, say, someone in Australia, I seem to be in their opinion one of Australia's major writers, a claim that I'd never make for myself. (Koval)

It *is*, however, as Murnane notes, a claim being made on his behalf by his Swedish admirers and critics, who are acutely aware of his status in Australia. A recent appreciation of Murnane written by highly regarded Swedish novelist Steve Sem-Sandberg pointedly referred to Murnane's lack of recognition in Australia:

Despite winning the Patrick White Prize, Murnane's name is still not well known in his home country. The Patrick White Prize is given to authors whose work has not received the recognition they deserve. (Sem-Sandberg, my translation)

One could speculate as to why Murnane has received a positive reception in Sweden. There is no obvious answer to this question. Fawcner and other supporters have clearly played a part, but it is also certainly the case that factors other than individual advocates are needed to build and sustain a reputation. I would suggest that the originality, virtuosity and clear note of authenticity in Murnane's writing are important factors, be it in Australia, Sweden or elsewhere. These elements may not make reading Murnane an easily accessible experience, or his novels a readily marketable commodity, but they do ensure that he attracts an informed and committed readership.

Murnane's comment to Ramona Koval that an international audience can 'open their eyes and look with (a) fresh gaze at things' is also relevant to his reception outside Australia. New, non-Australian readers will come to the experience of reading Murnane with fewer preconceptions of what constitutes an 'Australian' novel; or an Australian mode of representing land or space and their relationship to an individual; or of the thematic concerns that are currently considered to be important to the Australian national consciousness. Murnane is acutely aware that thematically his fiction may be at odds with, or at least exist independent of, any prevailing national interest or sentiment, and that his Australian readership has therefore never been responding to the 'cultural nationalist moment'. Indeed he has directly linked his lack of attention to major national issues with his capacity to attract international readers:

I don't think it odd or unusual that a clear-eyed reader on the other side of the world should consider brilliant a text of mine that many earnest sheep-

like judges in Australia had found puzzling or eccentric or whatever or may even have admired but hesitated to praise more than was seemly for the work of a marginal Australian writer as against a major writer addressing the fashionable issues or concerns of contemporary society. (Letter)

International readers will also come to the reading of Murnane with fewer preconceptions created by uncomprehending media representation. For although it is also a problem for other authors, Murnane has perhaps suffered more than most from a form of type-casting by the Australian press. When he does attract notice in the general media it is often of a patronising nature—with clichéd descriptions of the obsessive and idiosyncratic nature of both Murnane and his writing combining to portray him as some kind of *savant*; with his fiction being valued, but also dismissed, as ‘difficult’. Journalists who perhaps intend to praise Murnane often end up, through ignorance or indifference, in demeaning him.

The support of Murnane by high-profile critics and scholars has also proven to be something of a mixed blessing in this country. Australia’s small and often insular literary world produces factions, rivalries and antagonisms that can distort critical appraisal, producing an account of an author’s work that is influenced by real or imagined political affiliations. For a writer to be praised in some quarters, immediately condemns that writer—not on the merits of what he or she has authored but because he or she becomes associated with those who praise them. In this regard we encounter the least attractive aspect of partisanship and it is something from which Murnane has suffered, with several of his Australian supporters associated with political views which render the books of this not overtly political writer unpalatable to some readers.

An example of the way in which such associations can work is provided in the recent writings of academic critic Ken Gelder. Gelder has, with little obvious point other than to help mount an attack on Murnane’s conservative supporters—and despite acknowledging that Murnane has a ‘negligible political profile’ (*After the Celebration*, 11)—frequently associated the novelist’s meticulous style with the literary perspectives and politics of those supporters. In a recent ‘debate’ with conservative critic and Murnane admirer Peter Craven conducted in the pages of *Overland*, Gelder writes;

Peter also seems uneasy about the political imperatives of literature. Most Old Tories are, usually believing that the literary experience should be a ‘pure’ one. . . . One of Peter’s favourite novelists, Gerald Murnane—also a favourite of the ultra-Right political columnist for the Australian and chair of the Literature Board, Imre Salusinszky—provides a good example of this sort of literary hygiene, a self-styled ‘technician’ who seems to aspire towards a condition of ‘pure’ story. (‘Criticism and fiction’, 75)

Elsewhere in *Overland*, and again criticising the literary preferences and reviewing activities of Craven and Salusinszky and calling for a ‘critical political realism’, Gelder describes Murnane as a ‘monomaniacal Australian Tory modernist’ (‘Politics and monomania’, 51), thereby completing the misleading conflation between the politics of the author and his supporters. Gelder is a sophisticated and informed reader and critic, and his comments on Murnane sit within the context of a wider discussion about the intersections between literature, politics and criticism. However his rhetorical strategy of loosely associating Murnane with the politico-literary preferences of his ‘ultra-Right’

and ‘Tory’ supporters can only serve to marginalise Murnane in the eyes of the readers of the left-leaning *Overland*.

This problem of an author becoming ‘collateral damage’ in the battle over Australian literary authority is, however, transcended to some extent when interest and praise come from outside Australia, unencumbered by local rivalries. Call it a continuation of the cultural cringe if you will, but approbation from other countries, and non-English speaking ones at that, has emerged as an important element in the promotion of Murnane’s work in Australia. The references to it in the granting of both the New South Wales Premier’s Prize and the Australia Council award seem calculated to remind us that here is a writer who has ‘made it’ elsewhere; who thereby deserves to be more widely known and regarded in his own country; and who will be abetted by winning prizes such as these. It is an appeal for recognition made ‘over the heads’ of local critics and readers, and calling upon the authority conferred by the same global marketplace of sales and ideas that has, according to Davis, Carter and McCann, been in part responsible for undermining Australian literary fiction.

CONCLUSION

It is very likely that Murnane’s muted, but nonetheless discernible, international recognition has been instrumental in extending his writing career. After virtually announcing his retirement several years ago he is paused to publish his first new full work of fiction since 1995. It is probable that the positive response from some international critics and the opening up of a secondary readership has created the sense that Murnane’s reputation is on the rise, thereby maintaining interest from local publishers and readers, and in turn sustaining his desire to continue writing.

Furthermore, Murnane’s experience is a probable indicator of the future reception of Australian literary fiction in a globalised world. It will increasingly be an environment in which the international audience speaks and writes back to Australia in ways that create—or recreate—local reputations. This has perhaps been the case for some time for high profile authors such as Peter Carey, Thomas Keneally and Geraldine Brooks, who have been ‘exported’ along with their work as players in a global culture of literary celebrity, and viewed alongside film stars, sporting heroes and business tycoons as somehow representing Australia in the international arena. But Murnane is different, and his case is more typical of those authors who struggle to build and maintain a readership without compromising the literary qualities of their fiction. His reputation has been built upon boutique publishing and personal advocacy, supported, as is necessary, by an impressive body of work. International recognition has not created for Murnane a mass audience or the certainty of having his novels in print. It has, however, delivered a second readership, probably no more numerically significant than his Australian readers, but at this point in time perhaps more influential in shaping his reputation and future prospects, both abroad *and* in Australia.

NOTES

¹ An example from one of Murnane’s international critics, Karin Hansson, will suffice. ‘[Murnane’s geographies] are recognisable from one book to another, characterised by a set of features that make it possible to define a Murnanean landscape by its properties and functions. He deals with a unique and personal

precinct that is totally mental, often referred to as an inland, and the geographical specifications carry similar symbolic connotations in the totality of his oeuvre'. (1)

² National and international scholars with an interest in Murnane's fiction were brought together in September 2001 when Salusinszky and Indyk organised a research seminar at the University of Newcastle at a time when they were both working at the University. International attendees included Nicholas Birns, Andrew Zawacki and Lars Ahlstrom. Karin Hansson was prevented from attending due to illness.

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