

**Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi. *Sensational Melbourne: Reading, Sensation Fiction and Lady Audley's Secret in the Victorian Metropolis*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011, 170 pp.
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The multiple ways in which books travelled between Britain and its colonies in the nineteenth century is well-established, and there is a growing body of work that investigates the effect of these travels upon their reception, as novels accrued fresh meanings and circulated in diverse ways in new locales. *Sensational Melbourne* takes one, wildly popular and exemplary British sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and uses it to examine literary practices and their impact on life in one colonial metropolis: Melbourne. It 'plucks just one volume from the many shiploads of books which sailed from British cities to colonial ports, in order to trace and extrapolate from the life of a single text, and its role in the lives of its readers and the societies in which they lived' (147). This book examines the way sensationalism circulated, reflecting and producing an 'Empire of print [that read British sensation fiction] in relation to the other texts, events and writers that were circulating in the high Victorian era of the novel, ranging from the English cannon to the daily news' (42). *Sensational Melbourne* addresses itself particularly to the influence of sensationalism on nineteenth-century Australian examples of sensation fiction, refusing to see these as distinct from the British genre, and positing instead the migration of sensational reading material from Britain to Australian *and back again*.

In fact *Sensational Melbourne* ranges widely, examining not only *Lady Audley* but a range of Australian sensation novels published from the 1860s until the end of the nineteenth century, journalism, theatrical productions and advertisements, arguing that sensation novels of the period refused their own boundaries, 'filling the margins and overflowing the page onto banners, pamphlets and household products' (148). The authors' use of digital editions of nineteenth century journals informs a very interesting discussion of the way sensational novels appeared on the page, enabling them to trace the myriad ways in which sensation novels were 'intimately bound up with Victorian newspapers and magazines' (18); they appeared in them alongside advertisements but also as the subject of advertisements, as commodities to be bought, sold and read. *Sensational Melbourne* particularly examines the inter-implication of sensation fiction and sensational journalism in the Victorian news, with each using the other as a resource. It identifies the cross-infection between sensational events and reports of them in the press; the reciprocal influence of sensation fiction and sensation journalism upon each other; and press reports about sensation fiction which determined that it was an 'infection that spread through society' (23-4). Indeed Martin and Mirmohamadi note that sensation novels were often thought to be *like* the popular press in so far as 'both were seen as disposable, mostly non-serious, temporary reading,' full of sensational material and linked to the modern, consumer-driven world (20).

This argument, linking sensation fiction to other sensationalist writing, will be known to those familiar with scholarly work on British sensation fiction. This includes influential work such as Thomas Boyle's *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead* (1989), which argues that sensation novels drew upon newspaper reports of crimes like fraud, murder, bigamy, impersonation and wrongful incarceration, and Lyn Pykett's *The Sensation Novel* (1994), which argues that sensationalism registers and emerges from a broader moral panic of the kind that Martin and Mirmohamadi explore in their later chapters. However, there is, as yet, little work done on the way the sensation phenomenon travelled beyond Britain, both in terms

of the way sensation novels were read and interpreted elsewhere, and their influence upon other national literatures. The strength of *Sensational Melbourne* lies in the application of these arguments to the colonial metropolis. The book traces the life of *Lady Audley's Secret* beyond the novel itself, to examine the way that 'the shockwaves from this novel [...] reverberated through colonial Melbourne, picking up on and magnifying dormant as well as newly-generated cultural anxieties' (148). It argues that the international sensation of Braddon's novel, and sensation fiction more generally, accrued local meanings within the context of daily life in the colonial city. The text approaches its material with a dual focus, examining the ways in which both the ideas contained within *Lady Audley* and other sensation novels, and the material books themselves, travelled to and within Melbourne:

... [t]ucked under arms, held close to the body, carried bundled with other volumes and papers, books journeyed [...] via carriage, rail and foot, through public urban spaces and into private ones, where they were read in gardens, drawing rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, their readers prone, or propped, or seated, amidst a background of quietness or the bustle of food preparation. (147)

In this way the book evocatively traces the circulation of sensation through the colonial city, from bookstores like Mullen's, to public libraries. The reader of *Sensational Melbourne* follows an imagined reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* onto trams, trains, into theatres and peripatetically through identifiable Melbourne streets.

The reception and influence of British sensation fiction in Melbourne is of particular interest since, as the authors point out, Australia recurs in sensation fiction, and other nineteenth-century British novels, as a site to which characters disappear, often re-emerging years later, perhaps having amassed a fortune. Many critics have noted that in Victorian fiction, produced primarily for a British readership, Australia is an 'other' place, utterly foreign, prompting Martin and Mirmohamadi to speculate about the experience of reading these texts in the colony: 'Well may *we* ask why it had such enduring popularity amongst Australian readers, especially given that their place of reading was in its pages visible only through an inverted English-centred lens' (41). The authors observe that in British sensation fiction Australia is a 'faintly exotic and other site for titillating events, but it is also part of the recognisable self of a global imperial web where media, commerce, fashion and performance all function in recognisably similar ways' (22). Indeed, Tom Gunning (1995) links the phenomenon of sensationalism to empire as a particular aspect of the broadening horizons of modernity. In *Sensational Melbourne*, sensationalism in its multiple manifestations is a British phenomenon that travels via this imperial web, transforming the Australian literary landscape, but also, the authors argue, becoming transformed by it so that by the 1880s and 1890s, 'sensationalism had been marketed back to Britain by colonial producers, or shaped and consumed in Britain as Colonial product, in the form of sensational Colonial adventure tales' (130).

It is the oscillation between understanding sensation fiction as international in its influence and effects, and the tight focus on a specific location, that constitutes much of the interest of the book. For example, the authors discuss Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, which references both Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her novels, including *Lady Audley's Secret*, as well as other sensational writing. The authors argue that this text is 'a maze of literary intersections, making repeated reference to sensation and textuality from the opening scene in which the murder is introduced, not through conventional third person narration, but in "what the [nineteenth-century Melbourne newspaper] *Argus* said"' (46). Martin and

Mirmohamadi suggest that this novel takes British sensation's themes and anxieties and transplants them into an Australian setting. Here, in contrast to its representation in British fiction, Australia is not a conveniently distanced place, but is uncannily familiar, with the same class, gender and moral anxieties as the Britain itself. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the authors' argument in this regard is that reading sensation fiction, and the debates that surrounded it, shaped Melbourne as a 'distinct literary space', enabling the colonial city to define itself as a literary city. In part this was because, for the press who reviewed *Lady Audley's Secret* and other sensation novels, 'the dangers of sensationalism [...] were represented as having localised, Melbourne ramifications' (45). These writers evoked the 'streets and slums of Melbourne, infected with the sensationalism of Braddon and her ilk' (45). In the authors' analysis, Melbourne becomes a 'city of words, where sensational print proliferated, and text both adorned and described the streets that lined Mr Hoddle's grid' (147). In this way, Melbourne was projected as a site of sensationalism, with the novels that emerged from the city in the mid- to late-nineteenth century giving conventional sensational themes a local twist, raising the possibility that beneath the veneer of respectability here, as in Britain, lurked crime and corruption. Martin and Mirmohamadi argue that in Henry Newton Goodrich's *Raven Rockstrow*, (1864), an early example of sensation fiction set in Melbourne, '[the city's] streets, laneways and pathways, traversed by the book's characters and readers alike, were named with such regularity and accuracy as to make it possible for imaginative journeys across urban streets to match precisely actual ones' (50).

Martin and Mirmohamadi use these vivid evocations of urban Melbourne themselves in order to imagine women readers as they traversed the city streets, buying and borrowing books. As a number of critics have noted, women featured prominently in relation to sensation fiction, as its writers and readers, and in contemporary reviews, which particularly targeted the genre's representation of non-normative femininities, women who resisted, or downright rebelled against, Victorian domestic ideals (see, for example, Pykett, (1992) and Mangham (2007)). In a sense the authors use this very link between women and sensation to recuperate women's presence on the streets of Melbourne. Their chapter titled 'Watching *Lady Audley*' focuses on women not in order to explore their representation in fiction but to render them visible as shoppers, strollers, and especially readers in nineteenth century Melbourne. Moreover, they offer a very interesting discussion of the way in which toward the end of the nineteenth century a range of Australian novels, like *A Woman's Friendship* (1889), offered women textual representations of themselves as mobile; that is, via sensational texts, women could watch (or read) themselves moving about a city whose streets they recognised (95).

Through this abundance of material, ranging from Braddon's novel to Australian sensation fiction, and from court cases to press reports and advertising material in journals, *Lady Audley* acts, as the authors put it as 'a sensational guide' (148), with both text and eponymous character providing a loose frame for what is a far-reaching discussion of reading practices across a range of media in nineteenth-century Melbourne. It is this very range of material that is both the strength and weakness of *Sensational Melbourne*. It provides a welcome transnational and interdisciplinary approach to both sensation fiction and the shaping of Melbourne's literary culture via both text and urban space, but at certain moments more detailed analysis of the materials seems desirable. To give one example, the descriptions of sensation fiction remain fairly general, glossing the key characteristics of it as it emerged from Britain in order to progress to the more specific, localised argument about sensational Melbourne. This seems reasonable in a book whose focus is the colonial metropolis. However, as a result, the discussion of Australian sensation novels feels similarly generalised in places, rather than offering a sustained analysis of how these text *reworked*

sensation in their colonial context. As I have noted, the authors argue that by the end of the nineteenth century Australian sensation fiction was marketed back to Britain, but there is little sense of *how* it was read and received once it had made the return journey. Nor is there a great deal of direction about where to look to fill in the detail of scholarly debates about sensation fiction or about reading practices in the Australian context. Indeed, it is a little difficult to locate the intended audience for this slim volume. There is not much sense in the book of the fields from which it emerges and to which it contributes, either in relation to the circulation of British literature in nineteenth century Australia or to debates about sensation fiction itself. The book approaches its subject matter lightly, with footnotes and paratextual material kept to a strict minimum; an indication that the book will, perhaps, have appeal beyond academia, aligned with popular histories of Melbourne, like those of Robyn Annear, and other localised, interdisciplinary accounts of place, like Kerryn Goldsworthy's more recent *Adelaide* (2011).

Nonetheless, *Sensational Melbourne* is fascinating to read for its vivid account of 'Marvellous Melbourne' as a literary space and, in its movement between sensationalism in Britain and its manifestations in Australia (and back again), constitutes an important step toward traversing distances between national-based discussions of literary formations like sensation fiction. While discussions of sensation fiction remain largely tied to British texts, Martin and Mirmohamadi provide a fascinating account of the way sensation travelled not only among different kinds of texts, but also across the Empire.

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