

**Victoria Kuttainen. *Unsettling Stories: Settler Postcolonialism and the Short Story Composite*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 386pp.
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Victoria Kuttainen's first monograph is an important contribution to Australian literary studies, but this ambitious book goes well beyond the boundaries of the field and also engages in a significant and thorough manner with American and Canadian literature, all within the broader rubric of Postcolonial Studies. *Unsettling Stories* is the first book-length study of the connections between the short story composite (also known as the linked collection of short stories) and postcolonialism, focusing in particular on short fiction from settler colonies. Kuttainen compares collections of short fiction from Australia, the United States and Canada within a postcolonial theoretical paradigm. Authors whose work is analysed in Kuttainen's monograph include Thea Astley, Olga Masters, Tim Winton, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Scott R. Sanders, Tim O'Brien, Margaret Laurence, Stephen Leacock and Sandra Birdsell. It is particularly refreshing to see American authors analysed from a postcolonial perspective. Examining in detail collections of short fiction produced by ten authors from three nations is a massive task, and the product of Kuttainen's research and analysis is a lengthy text that some readers may find dense and overwhelming at times.

Kuttainen's ambitious project of analysing short story composites from three national literatures heeds recent calls for a more transnational approach to Australian literary studies by critics such as Robert Dixon, Ken Gelder, Michael Jacklin and Graham Huggan. Since Kuttainen obtained her BA Hons and MA from the University of British Columbia and her PhD from the University of Queensland, and currently lectures at James Cook University in northern Queensland, her education, research and life experiences ideally position her to conduct transnational work. *Unsettling Stories* contains five chapters bookended by a thirty-two page introduction and a twelve-page conclusion. Kuttainen's project is structured thematically, a logic made clear by the five chapter titles: 'Tales about Family'; 'Small-Town Tales'; 'Tales about Home'; 'Tales about History'; and 'Tales of Trauma.' Four of the chapters contain a comparative internal structure, with Kuttainen analysing short story composites by Canadian and American authors (chapters one and two); American, Australian and Canadian authors (chapter four); and American and Australian authors (chapter five); while chapter three focuses closely on just one collection, Australian author Olga Masters' *A Long Time Dying*. The book's structure works well for the most part, and the comparative chapters reveal interesting connections between national literatures that may not otherwise be apparent. However, each chapter is rather long, with four of the chapters covering more than fifty pages: chapter four is almost a book in itself, spanning more than one hundred pages. Kuttainen's text would have benefited from the use of shorter chapters, and the fourth chapter should have been divided into two chapters.

Unsettling Stories brings welcome attention to the study of literatures from settler societies, which, as Kuttainen notes, have been "regarded suspiciously" for possessing an "insufficiently pure postcolonialism" (4). Kuttainen's central argument is that short story composites "are well-suited to expressing the 'difficult relations' that Alan Lawson has observed as defining

characteristics of settler cultures and their poetics” (7). Kuttainen describes settlers as ‘difficult subjects’ due to their colonial history, their often-tense relationship with Indigenous peoples, and their desire for cultural authority and authenticity (7). Kuttainen is careful to avoid drawing simple parallels between settler societies and erasing difference and complexity; her careful, nuanced and meticulous approach is to be applauded. She is well aware of the difficulties of conducting comparative work and the political complexities of producing postcolonial scholarship; as she notes in her introduction, ‘to find a writing position and a voice in the midst of this noisy squabble is ... [a] difficult quest’ (26). Kuttainen provides comprehensive discussions of postcolonial theory, particularly theories relating to settler colonies, and helpful information from narrative theorists regarding the short story composite as a genre. Her analysis of the primary texts is usually insightful and convincing, but she often favours theorising over close reading. As a result, readers turning to *Unsettling Stories* in search of a close reading of a particular text, such as Tim Winton’s *The Turning*, may be disappointed.

An epigraph from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* precedes the table of contents, signalling the theoretical bent of Kuttainen’s project. Kuttainen cites numerous theorists, including Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, Diana Brydon, Graham Huggan, Linda Hutcheon, Alan Lawson, Stephen Slemon, Helen Tiffin and Gillian Whitlock. The mixture of continental and settler society theorists reveals an interesting intellectual heritage that demonstrates much about the ways in which early career researchers are trained in postcolonial settler societies such as Canada and Australia. Kuttainen’s extensive engagement with critical theory (and her skillful deployment of it) seems to have influenced her writing style a great deal. In her prose, Kuttainen often uses the rhetoric of theory, particularly the habit of using verbs such as ‘trouble’ and ‘trope.’ Such habits, combined with an extensive use of jargon and numerous abstractions within a single sentence, can at times get in the way of clear communication. Although Kuttainen engages extensively with theorists, she often fails to engage with the criticism of the primary works. For example, her section on Thea Astley’s *It’s Raining in Mango* does not even mention, let alone engage with, Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni’s edited collection *Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds* (2008), which includes essays by Astley and many prominent critics, including Leigh Dale, Brian Matthews, Susan Lever, Paul Sharrad and Kerry Goldsworthy. Moreover, this collection of essays is not included in the bibliography.

Kuttainen’s monograph is a revised version of her doctoral thesis, “‘Telling Tales’: Settler Fictions and the Short Story Composite,” which she completed in 2007. The thesis was three hundred and sixty pages long, which is almost the same length as the monograph. I am certainly not opposed to revised doctoral theses being published as monographs; however, even though I have not conducted a detailed comparison of the thesis and the monograph, I get the impression that the manuscript was not revised significantly and believe that it would have benefited from a thorough revision. I am not about to engage in a debate regarding the merits of various publishers, but Cambridge Scholars Publishing have done both Kuttainen and her readers a disservice by not proofreading the text more carefully or ensuring that *Unsettling Stories* contains an accurate and comprehensive index. The text contains a number of typographical errors and the index is quite scant, as well as often inaccurate. Moreover, the bibliography does not list any of Sandra Birdsell’s works, even though Kuttainen analyses two of her short story collections. Again, the publisher, rather than the author, should take the blame for such errors

and omissions, and the lack of careful editing and proofreading, combined with poor indexing, seems to be a recent trend in academic publishing that affects even the most prestigious publishers. The aforementioned problems are unfortunate, since for many readers they will detract from a book that has many admirable qualities and makes a significant contribution to several fields of study, including Postcolonial Studies; Australian, American and Canadian literary studies; and narrative theory.

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