

***Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds.* Ed. Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni.  
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This volume of essays is the first to be devoted to Thea Astley's fiction. It arranges in chronological order a selection of critical responses to Astley's writing from the 1980s to the present, and is designed to promote more scholarly work on this most prolific of contemporary Australian writers. The collection was devised at the ASAL conference held in Sydney in July 2004, shortly before Astley's death in August, and it was launched on the lawns of the University of Sydney at the ASAL conference marking Professor Elizabeth Webby's retirement in February 2007. All of the essays have been published previously, with the exception of the last three; these are contributions by Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni, and the inaugural Thea Astley lecture delivered by Kate Grenville at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival in 2005.

The edition includes a bibliography of works by and about Thea Astley, which very usefully includes theses. This catalogue of primary and secondary work also records a conundrum, one that is commented upon time and again in the essays themselves, and which is in and of itself worthy of a thesis or two. Astley was a prolific writer. She published 16 novels and several collections of stories. Four of her novels won the Miles Franklin Prize, Australia's most prestigious award for fiction, and she was the only Australian woman novelist of her generation to have won success early and to publish consistently throughout a writing career of forty years. Her books have always received the attention of reviewers and prize judges, and yet they have not received the serious critical and scholarly attention that Patrick White, David Malouf, Peter Carey and other fiction writers enjoy. Why is this so? What can be done to enhance Astley's place in the canon of Australian literature and set a process of critical debate and recognition in motion? As Sheridan and Genoni point out in their Introduction, in part Astley's profile will be determined by the capacity of publishers to keep her fiction in print, and the capricious nature of school and university curricula. But academic critics also have a role to play in shaping new approaches to her fiction. Only two journal articles or book chapters appeared before 1980 (both included here), 17 in the 1990s, and 11 between 2000 and 2005.

Speculation about the muted response to Astley's writing by academic critics recurs across the essays, and the chronological ordering highlights how early

this emerged as a concern amongst Astley critics—essays by Brian Matthews in 1987 and Susan Lever in 1996 and Sheridan in 2006 begin from this point, and others comment in passing. The debate is valuable for the questions it raises about academic literary scholarship and relations between writers and scholars across this period when Australian literary studies was growing in authority, and when both feminist and postcolonial criticism shaped critical perspectives that, in theory at least, could respond to Astley's fiction. Sheridan and Genoni include several classic essays by Astley herself, where she reminds us that she constantly returns to “the misfit, the outsider, the less than successful” (1) in her fiction, and “the stuffy rituals of white colonialism” (1). Yet, with disarming candour, Astley also confesses that she is “incapable of playing the game of writer-taking-himself [sic] seriously seriously”, and there is a strong streak of anti-intellectualism in her engagement with the literary intelligentsia: “Flippancy is my defence. What's yours?” (5) Astley's fictions demand a highly sophisticated intellectual engagement with language and style, and she taught creative writing at Macquarie University for many years. However, she remained ambivalent about the writer as a celebrity and intellectual at a time when Australian writers were increasingly called upon to perform as stars on the circuit of conferences and festivals, and across a variety of media. Compare Astley to Elizabeth Jolley, for example, both women writers of the same generation. Yet Jolley was able to project a public persona that became a beloved presence in Australian literary circles. Astley was a formidable intellectual, yet she was either unwilling or unable to engage in the celebrity circuit that became an increasingly important projection of authorship in Australian writing late last century. Debra Adelaide takes up this issue of the marketability of the contemporary Australian woman writer in her essay, and it is a fruitful line of enquiry to grasp the different trajectories of writing careers.

Inevitably some contributions respond more successfully than others to the editors' desires to give Astley's writing its due recognition. A few essays have not aged well; an academic article on Astley in a respected literary journal in the 1990s is not necessarily well equipped to the rigours of a collection setting out to establish critical engagement in 2006. The risk of recycled literary criticism is that it has served its purpose; warmed over and served again it doesn't tempt a jaded palate. However, the best essays can do exactly the opposite. I was reminded of this by the power and resonance of one of the earliest examples: Kerryn Goldsworthy's essay “Thea Astley's Writing: Magnetic North”, originally published in 1983 when Astley was the author of eight fictions. Goldsworthy begins with an affectionate and funny recollection

that does recall astutely Astley's presence on the conference circuit: the ASAL conference in Brisbane, 1980:

Cut to the evening readings: Astley steps up to the microphone, which she adjusts, along with her voice and the sheaf of papers in her hand, before announcing "The story I'm about to read is called 'The Salad of the Bad Café.'" (64)

The memory is a precious one, and Goldsworthy goes on to connect this to what goes on in her writing: "it's full of ambiguous dualities, ironic reversals and polar extremes" (64). This highly engaged and personal essay is speculative and energetic, precisely the kind of criticism that leads me to think I should turn back and read *The Acolyte* again. It is a reminder that the best criticism brings to life the author, the texts and the critic, and genuinely engages its readers in a passionate engagement with literature.

What might trigger ongoing engagement with Astley's fictions, here and now? Kate Grenville surely signals one approach as she harnesses Astley's fictions to that most compelling of current debates: the place of history in fiction, and vice versa. The lecture was delivered in August 2005, a year after Astley's death and on the cusp of the debates catalysed by Grenville's *The Secret River* and her controversial comments on the empathy and imaginative understanding available to the historical novel. Grenville rereads *A Kindness Cup* (1974) and argues Astley was thirty years ahead of her time, and alert to "the fact that our own history provides a powerful engine for fiction, and that the voice of fiction can say the unspoken about history" (177). Certainly this pays due recognition to Astley's unflinching representations of the violent history of racism and colonialism here. In other respects, however, Astley is an unlikely conscript for Grenville's argument, most particularly the claim that she "catapults us as readers beyond notions of right and wrong, beyond judgments or justification, and into the greatest wisdom of all—empathy" (180). This is precisely what Astley refuses to do, as other essays on Astley's historical fictions by Leigh Dale and Paul Sharrad suggest. Dale reads *The Kindness Cup* and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* as caught up in "the struggle to reconcile the weight and material damage of history with the relative impotence of those who embody that history. It also raises complex questions about the role played by fiction, history, the body, and landscape in shaping contemporary understandings of 'being a Queenslander'" (143). I must confess to a sense of belatedness when encountering Astley's essay "Being a Queenslander", reproduced as Chapter Three here. However, Dale, like Goldsworthy, produces a fresh engagement with Astley's work that sends us back to the fiction and the essay with interest. What can be more relevant for Queenslanders now than engaging with the history and ongoing presence of

Palm Island, the genesis of the race conflict in *Rainshadow*? Sharrad's reading of *Beachmasters*, originally published in 1990, also suggests the complexity of Astley's engagement with colonial history in the Pacific region, for this narrative is shaped in terms of irresolvable ambiguities rather than moral closure. Dale secures the point: Astley's work consistently presents difficulties for readers working with existing portfolios of critical approaches, and her work "obstructs" readers seeking ideological closure because "it presents significant difficulties—and potentials—for thinking through relationships between language, representation and the materiality of colonial history" (149). It is a brave critic who suggests Astley catapults us into the greatest wisdom of all! Grenville and Astley engage with the past differently, and the diverse relations of history and fiction in contemporary Australian writing need attention. Astley doesn't "feel" her way back to the eighteenth century, although the traditions of Augustan literature are essential to her repertoire.

The challenges set by Astley's writing come back to the demands of engaging with currently unfashionable modes of satire, parody and irony; that figure who relishes "The Salad of the Bad Café" requires critics to respond to a highly intellectual, allusive and intertextual style of prose fiction. Astley constantly tests her readers' intellectual repertoire: classical music, the texts and traditions of Catholicism, the English literary tradition, Western philosophy, our own regional culture and history are all drawn into the language play. The late Elizabeth Perkins produced a series of germinal essays designed to shape a critical language appropriate for Astley's distinctive style, and many critics in this collection acknowledge their debt to these fresh "deconstructive readings". Like Susan Lever, Perkins regards Astley as a self-absorbed writer constantly engaged in echoing her own earlier writing with satiric intent. Perkins calls upon readers to engage with this writing as an *opus*—a set of compositions that deserve to be read intertextually. Here, as elsewhere (most notably the essay by Bruce Clunies Ross), the reference to "opus" suggests that musical forms are integral to the intellectual sophistication of Astley's fictions—very explicitly so in *Vanishing Points*, the subject of Perkins's essay selected for the collection. Perkins's legacy to Astley criticism is, as Debra Adelaide and Susan Sheridan suggest in their essays, a critical language to approach texts suffused with irony, that refuse to offer a single moral focus or political viewpoint for the reader (the contrast with Grenville's claims is clear). In her essay on gender and reputation, Adelaide describes Astley as an "orchestrator" of ideas in her fictions, refusing to reconcile and politicize issues in any single or consistent way; her signature is a highly allusive, layered and self-conscious prose style, non-linear and open-ended.

One of the final ironies in the Astley *opus* is that *Drylands*, her last novel, is a bleak and savage satire subtitled “a book for the world’s last reader”. In her essay Sheridan considers the unease, even hostility, produced by the book which confirms the alienation of contemporary Australian readers from the Astley “signature” text. By turning to Ross Chambers on reading oppositional narrative and Linda Hutcheon’s work on affect and effect of irony, Sheridan’s essay explores the complex relations between reader and text triggered by *Drylands* and Astley’s fiction more generally. The problem is not that the failure of this ironic prose style to produce emotion, rather these are more ambiguous and complicitous than we may desire. There is something comfortable about empathic engagement, and it is a comfort zone that Astley refuses to offer her reader. Future critical work on Astley might well begin here, by exploring critical languages beyond the preoccupations of Australian literary and critical traditions, which have to date struggled to respond to Astley’s distinctive *opus*. *Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds* identifies the problem, and it suggests where future scholarly work might begin: look to the reader.

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