

**Karen Lamb. *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather*.
St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2015. xiv + 360pp.
\$AUD 34.95**

ISBN 9780702253560 (Pbk)

<http://www.uqp.uq.edu.au/book.aspx/1342/Thea%20Astley%20Inventing%20Her%20Own%20Weather>

In *Inventing Her Own Weather*, Karen Lamb recalls that she first contacted Astley in the mid-1990s and declared her intention to write the author's biography—an approach that was greeted with considerable wariness by the intended subject. As Lamb rightly concedes, not all authors appreciate the personal scrutiny required by the biographer's art.

At the time Lamb contacted Astley, her subject was not only very much alive (Astley passed away in 2004, shortly before her 79th birthday) but was still actively writing. And not only was Astley active, but she was still working at the peak of her considerable powers and indeed enjoying a golden autumn to her career. It could be argued that, almost alone of major Australian fiction writers of the twentieth century, Astley only ever got better with age. If we take literally Lamb's assertion that her initial contact with Astley was mid-decade, then she was still ahead of her two late career triumphs in the piercingly acerbic critique of institutionalised post-colonial racism, *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (1996), and her final novel, *Drylands: A Book for the World's Last Reader* (1999), a razor-sharp and savagely self-reflexive account of a potent life-force draining away amongst serially shattered dreams. *Drylands* stands as not only one of the most remarkable 'signings-off' in the national literature, but in claiming for Astley her fourth Miles Franklin Award it also ensured that she exited Australian literary life a winner. To claim that Astley only improved with age is not, however, to say that each book was necessarily 'better' than its predecessor, but rather that over the course of four decades and sixteen books her characterisation only grew sharper, the satire more focused, the plots more astringent, the style more acute.

No amount of prize-winning, positive reviews, or occasionally good sales, could however, secure for Astley a fixed and reliable place in Australian cultural life. For whereas other authors of her generation or thereabouts established early-on a foothold in the national imagination by marrying their authorial identity to a strong biographical presence (Randolph Stow as the grazier's scion-turned-tormented seer of the wheatbelt and inland; Thomas Keneally as the ex-seminarian running his copiously critical eye over church morals; Christopher Koch as the austere Tasmanian grappling with the deep-rooted sense of being an outsider), for most of her long career Astley struggled to be recognised as anything other than a copiously disgruntled suburban house-wife (the gendered element of these assessments is duly noted—it was perhaps only with the emergence of Helen Garner in the late 1970s that a woman writer managed to establish a compelling biographical presence).

Lamb's highly assured biography is therefore a significant milestone in that it provides Astley's readers and scholars with a far more complete and nuanced account of her background and life than has hitherto been available. In Astley's case, there is certainly plenty in her background that adds immensely to understanding her fiction and career. Lamb deals deftly and with great empathy with the important elements of her subject's early years. These include her close relationship with her journalist father, Cecil—forged amidst a troubled marriage and alongside a difficult relationship between mother and daughter—that blessed Astley with her love of language and writing; her love for her brother, Phil, that would be

tested but never seriously strained by his decision to join the priesthood while Astley largely rejected Catholicism as a teen; her own wavering relationship with the church at the same time as she was supported by the nuns at two Brisbane schools (particularly her secondary school, All Hallows) who recognised and valued her literary skills and ambitions; and her engagement with the committed—although not particularly consequential—Barjai group of young writers who were based at the University of Queensland, and who provided her with a much-needed social structure as she drifted away from Catholicism. Lamb does an excellent job in expressing how from an early age, Astley demonstrated a tendency to social awkwardness that would mature into a low-key eccentricity. However, Lamb also captures the charismatic charm of a young woman with fixed ambitions who was prepared to find her own path through life.

From the publication of her first novel, *Girl with a Monkey* (1958), Astley's career as a writer was fixed. Stints working in schools and university would never deter her from the steady progress of each successive novel, and Lamb fluently captures the relentless dedication to her craft that was required of a wife, mother and teacher.

In some ways the biographer's task is complicated by the fact that Astley's wasn't a particularly high-profile literary life, as she moved at the edges rather than centre of Australia's literary culture and its ongoing upheavals. Lamb recounts the novelist's friendships with the likes of Hal Porter, Amy Witting, Thomas Keneally, Rodney Hall, and Patrick White, but even here the material is not as sensational as it may have been, with even her inevitable falling-out with White being less spectacular than those usually associated with the great curmudgeon. Perhaps the most notable and influential of her literary relationships was not, however, with other writers, but with Angus & Robertson's renowned editor Beatrice Davis, who played a significant and long-term role as trusted editor, mentor and friend. Lamb recalls how Astley's deep-seated anxiety about her public reception, which could never be erased by the many prizes or positive reviews, was managed by the steady and supportive guidance she received from Davis. Davis provided an essential and stabilising counterbalance to the author's insecurity. Astley would follow Davis from A&R to Thomas Nelson mid-career, before the two finally parted ways, friendship intact, when Astley transferred to the University of Queensland Press with *An Item from the Late News* (1982). In reading the considerable amount of Astley's pointed correspondence that Lamb has compiled, directed not only to Davis but to other editors and publishers, one can appreciate the forbearance that must have been required of Davis in maintaining this professional and personal relationship over several decades.

The other great relationships of Astley's life as described by Lamb were with her immediate family—husband Jack and son Ed. Again the biographer is deft and sensitive in describing these relationships, neither of which were entirely conventional or without stress. The Astley marriage was somewhat 'open'—certainly not a common practice in the suburbs of Sydney where most of it was passed—but it is not a subject that Lamb dwells upon more than necessary. For her the essential thing to record about the marriage of Thea and Jack is that it was based on deep respect and friendship, and that Astley's writing career was encouraged and enabled by her husband.

Although this is not in any real sense a 'critical biography,' neither does Lamb avoid addressing the relationship between her subject's life and work, or indeed passing assessments on individual books. While there are loosely autobiographical components to much of Astley's fiction—at least to the extent expected of any writer of contemporary fiction

using local settings—Lamb does not over work this material. Rather she just sensibly allows the logical interplay of biography and text to emerge quite organically through her own consideration of Astley’s life, concerns and interests at particular times. There is still much scope and a considerable need for a comprehensive critical study of Astley’s fiction, but scholars up for the task can now proceed in the knowledge that there is a reliable and accessible biography that precedes them. Lamb’s pacing and tone are exemplary, and by the conclusion of *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather*, one can’t help but feel that her obvious admiration and affection for her subject are both well-justified, and have served her well.

On the final page of her final novel, Astley’s heroine, Janet Deakin, comes across a reassembled pile of her recent writings, on top of which somebody has scribbled ‘GET A LIFE.’ Mulling the words over in the midst of her abandoned house and afterthoughts of her inability to reassemble her own wilting life, Janet finds that ‘her hand, drunk on the pen, hesitated to write beneath the scribbled admonition the words ‘TOO LATE’ (*Drylands*, 294). Well, Astley most certainly did have a life, and it was well-lived in the service of her writing and in fulfilment of her youthful ambitions. In all likelihood this may be the only full-length biography to reassemble that life, and it was important that the task not only be done, but that it be done well. It has been. Astley may have greeted her mid-1990s meeting with her future biographer with some trepidation, but it is likely she would have been fully satisfied with the long-awaited outcome.

Paul Genoni, Curtin University

WORKS CITED

Astley, Thea. *Drylands: A Book for the World’s Last Reader*. Ringwood: Viking, 1999.