

**David Carter. *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity*.
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Near the beginning of the last essay in *Always Almost Modern*, David Carter makes an observation that offers a framework for understanding his book. ‘The critique of nationalism,’ he says, ‘has been a defining enterprise of both Australian studies and Australian literary studies since the 1970s’ (253). At one level this is a commonplace; one that Carter goes on to unpack with characteristic scholarly care. At another level the great strength of *Always Almost Modern* is that it works to organise itself differently. Here modernity, not nation, is the guiding framework. True, ‘nation’ is never far away. But the question at the centre of the book is: How has Australian culture understood itself as modern? Often, Carter argues, understandings of the relationship between Australian culture and modernity have been framed in terms of their belatedness: Australia is a nation constantly looking for signs that it has finally ‘grown up.’ At other times Australia has understood itself as home to primitive precursors of the modernity that later emerged in the metropolitan elsewhere and thus ahead of the international pack: modern before modernity; the global fringe leads the metropolis; the naive bests the knowing; its ‘belatedness . . . rewritten as originality’ (11).

This question of belatedness plays out sporadically but persistently across the sequence of essays in *Almost Always Modern*, all of which have been published previously, beginning in the late 1980s. On offer here is not simply a thesis about Australian modernities but a survey of one thematic of a career across a 25-year span. Carter, I think wisely, has resisted the urge to try and update and refine. Things stand as they were first published—a strategy made possible, in part, because the questions that animate the various chapters are remarkably contemporary and thematically consistent. The centre does hold.

We begin with a chapter where Carter describes how, while listening to a conference paper about how Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel *On the Beach* was postmodern before postmodernism, he realised that it rehearsed a form of argument often used by Australian commentators, and in particular literary commentators, ‘since at least the mid-nineteenth century’ (2). This argument, in condensed form, is that ‘Australia has always already been what European or American culture has only recently described as its own modernity’ (2). In other words, ‘Australia got there first’ (2), not necessarily because of the sophistication of its cultures but because of its remove from metropolitan centres and the sheer otherness of its landscapes and cultures. There is, Carter argues, a ‘particular postcolonial problematic’ that can be found in Marcus Clarke’s gothic vision of Australian culture: ‘In locating these qualities within Australian *nature* he effects those startling reversals that still carry force: the primeval discovered as the modern, the prehistoric as the unprecedented, “the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write”’ (3). P.R. Stephenson, the Jindyworobaks, the radical nationalists, can be understood as participants in this same anticipatory modernity. The Lindsay brothers’ *Vision* offers both a counter-example and yet an instance of modernity since, following the argument made by Humphrey McQueen in his *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944* (1979), their relentless scanning of the culture for examples of modernist decadence to denounce made them perhaps more up to date than anyone. An up-to-dateness that, in turn, they advertised in quasi-modernist manifestos. A.A. Phillips’s *The Australian Tradition* (1958) and ‘The Cultural

Cringe' (1950) support the case, as does H.P. Heseltine's 'The Literary Heritage' (1962) with its assertion that Australia 'came much earlier than European literature to deal with a number of key themes of late European awareness' (9). Heseltine's positioning of Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) as an exemplar that fuses together Australianness and modernity, Carter argues, 'clinches the argument' (9).

It is a good way to start. Carter's critique of the *On the Beach* conference paper unfolds as a picking apart of its assumptions about Antipodean otherness and yet concludes as 'a warning against general conclusions' (12), including, presumably, his own, and in particular against 'any attempt to treat Australian culture as a discrete organism, a general condition or state of mind' (12). Through this careful equivocation—and there are many examples throughout the book—Carter is able to pull back from binarist debates about national identity and the nature of Australianness that through the bush nationalism of the 1950s and early 1960s, the 'new nationalism' of the late 1960s and 1970s, and more recently, in revived public narratives of military sacrifice, developed as a kind of Australian exceptionalism—a marsupial marginality that at the same time seeks to speak to the centre. That 'Australia' and its culture, in the very act of their conception have always been of the logics of the centre, outpost or not, is made visible by a careful refusal of the standard modes of argument and the binaries of place and space, before and after, here and there, nature and culture, primitive and sophisticated, that underpin it.

What does an always already modern Australia look like? Carter's answers are varied. They are found in the publication histories of small journals as much as in an analysis of Australia's intellectual cultures. Australia, Carter argues, 'has always been a point where a complex pattern of cultural flows converged—and then diverged throughout the structure of local cultural institutions' (14). The history of Australian literary criticism, in particular, played a significant role in 'defining attitudes to modernity' (15). The dominant trope, and locus of contestation, from Frederick Sinnett in the 1850s, through Marcus Clarke, H.G. Turner, and Vance Palmer to Vincent Buckley writing in the late 1950s, is of a literary culture just beginning to emerge; a culture that would become an object of study in its own right with the institutionalisation of Australian literary studies within university curriculums from the mid-1950s. The 'maturity' of Australian literature was hence measured in terms of its alignment with Europeanness, with Patrick White as an exemplar. As Carter says, 'A model of cultural transference and transformation is more useful in describing this pattern than cultural evolution or "becoming"' (14). And indeed, by the 1990s Australia was an exporter of criticism in fields such as cultural studies, postcolonialism, and feminism, which had thrived as old concerns about maturity and universal values lost their cogency and it became clear that Australia was 'one point in a global circulation network in which import/export metaphors no longer make the best sense' (43).

Another answer can be found in an examination of print cultures, not least the often ephemeral seeming world of journals and magazines. Carter's chapters canvass a range of magazines and journals from the largely forgotten to the well-remembered. This emphasis on print culture, and in particular the seemingly ephemeral, is important because it acts as a reminder of the pivotal importance of print to unfolding Australian modernities. As Carter says, by looking at periodicals 'instead of the absence of modernity we discover the abundant presence of diverse kinds of modernity, manifested in a busy public print culture' (48). One of the better remembered is *Art in Australia*, published between 1916 and 1942, which focused on the Australian pastoral landscape tradition and gave much space to polemics against modern art from some of its fiercest critics, including the Lindsay brothers. Yet the journal

also kept a watch on any promising developments that might show that Australia was capable of producing contemporary, even modern, art. A special Margaret Preston number was among the journal's many engagements with modernism. For Carter the real interest lies not so much in the way the journal positioned itself with respect to modernism so much as in its position 'within modernity' (53) via its strong 'sense of its own contemporaneity' (55). Thus it was able to discover the 'logic of modernism within Australian art' (60) as part of a retrospectively constructed tradition within which the renewal of traditional forms was made possible.

Aussie magazine, launched in 1920 as competition to the *Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly*, was another site in Australia's vibrant pre-war print culture that exemplified the idea that the country was somehow 'growing up' to become 'modern.' Sporting a who's who of contributors—Vance Palmer, Dulcie Deamer, Lennie Lower, Mary Gilmore, A.G. Stephens, to name just a few—the magazine was part of the New Century Press stable that included *Humour*, *Lone Hand* and from 1929, *Australian Quarterly*. Styling itself as 'The Cheerful Monthly' its focus was on entertainment presented via a miscellany of anecdotes, verse, brief stories, asides, literary notes, cartoons, and so on with political content limited to a couple of pages per issue that proselytised pet themes such as protectionism, opposition to US popular culture, and the White Australia Policy. But the key question, so far as Carter is concerned, is why has *Aussie*, 'not played a larger role in the writing of Australian cultural history?' (68) After all, the magazine had a significant audience, selling over 100,000 copies per issue. And as Carter points out, nor was *Aussie* a 'bush magazine.' Rather, it instanced a particular and important moment in the urban becoming of Australian modernity, a moment in which new forms of liberalism were emerging that sought to transcend class war with new cooperative social forms. The early 1920s, as Carter says, were a crucial moment in the development of these liberal understandings, with their emphasis on efficiency, development and advances in manufacturing. *Aussie*'s dictum of 'cheerfulness,' as he says, was itself a gesture towards a form of exemplary national citizenship that sought to differentiate itself from discord and division.

Women played a leading role in formulating these modernities. Carter follows research by Helen Topliss to show how Preston, Grace Cossington-Smith and Grace Crowley were among the female artists championed by *Art in Australia* who 'turned the notion of a separate female artistic sphere to their own advantage,' so as to 'respond to the technical challenges of modernism' (53). *Aussie* championed the 'modern girl' epitomised by the figure of the 'dancing flapper': self-reliant, optimistic, natural, practical, worldly, professionally ambitious, a foil to Victorian moralism and its hypocrisies, yet at the same time at odds with natural womanliness.

Art in Australia and *Aussie* are among a slew of magazines and journals of the pre-war era that perhaps because of their very ephemerality found themselves closely engaged with debates about and experiments within early twentieth-century Australian modernity. The Lindsayite journal *Vision*, launched in 1923, as mentioned above, instanced a complex negotiation with its arch foe, vehemently opposing and yet replicating its forms. The early 1930s saw the publication of *Stream*, which was granted the Australian rights to publish new works by Ezra Pound. This was testament, Carter says, to Pound's 'relentless imperialism' and the 'international reach of modernism itself' (112). *Stream* did not survive to take up Pound's offer. *Strife*, another magazine published in the first half of the 1930s, edited by Judah Waten and Herbert McClintock, sought to take up a burning question of the post-depression 1930s: radical avant-garde or radical proletariat? The question was never settled

since the magazine, which billed itself as the ‘organ of the new culture,’ lasted only a single issue, being distributed and then seized by police at a demonstration at which Waten and McClintock were arrested. *Stream* sought to address these same concerns through a proposed forum on the clash between ‘two rival aesthetics’ (122). ‘Paris or Moscow’: that was the question. Though *Stream* also put Melbourne on this same map, as ‘a place teeming with modern activities’ (120). Sadly the forum was never held.

This story of Australian modernities in print involved a process of constant reinvention. Carter writes: ‘Across the history of new and especially modernist magazines in Australia, each publication has had to reinvent modernism anew and to argue, as if for the first time, a connection between modernism and its own local time and place’ (120). There is a reminder here, too, of the importance of such magazines, to the formation not only of modern Australian culture, but of collectivities of thought and people that fostered this culture. *Stream*, along with two other small, short-lived journals of the 1930s, *Proletariat* and *Masses*, brought together figures such as Guido Barrachi, Ralph Gibson, Edmond Higgins, Alwyn Lee, Jack Maugham, Cyril Pearl, Winston Rhodes and Geoffrey Sawyer.

Perhaps the centrepiece of the collection is an essay on the Australian middlebrow. This starts from the premise that much Australian criticism ‘is still structured through the spectacular opposition between high culture and low or popular or mass culture, even as we empty the oppositions of fixed value or positive essence’ (128). In short, the hierarchical ordering of cultural institutions and notions of cultural value is out of touch with the complexities of the cultural field. Emerging in the 1920s, the ‘middlebrow,’ as Carter argues, is an idea that owes something to the history of ‘literary phrenology’ (130). The subsequent ‘battle of the brows’ between middlebrow, highbrow and lowbrow ‘expressed an apprehension not just of divergent tastes but of antagonistic taste cultures, organised hierarchically, and mapping more or less neatly onto social class’ (131). As terms of abuse all three terms were ‘routinely feminised as the pansy highbrow, the sentimental, domestic middlebrow, and the all-consuming lowbrow in the image of the female consumer’ (131).

Middlebrow culture has a complex institutional history that ranges from the expansion of commodity culture to the rise of public broadcasting in the UK and responses to the modern atomisation of culture, to, in the US, the complex reaction of universities to mass culture as both champions and detractors of the middlebrow, and the emergence of book clubs as a reflection of the aspirations of a growing professional class to accumulate cultural capital. As such, Carter argues, the ‘middlebrow was in every respect a product of modernity’ (132). Carter identifies in Sydney adman Ure Smith’s magazines *Art in Australia* and *Home* the signs of an emerging Australian middlebrow. Both aimed at ‘old money’ and a middlebrow audience not made up of an emerging professional managerial class wanting to accumulate cultural capital, which is the US middlebrow audience famously identified by Janice Radway, but a more British-style aspirant audience—the ‘emerging “clerks”’ (137). This Australian middlebrow did not have the benefit of universities to support or oppose it, as in the US, since the first chairs of English literature were only just being appointed in Australia. It was at first largely an imported phenomenon, propagated through reprints of UK middlebrow bestsellers and discussion about them in the books pages of popular magazines and that could by the 1930s and 1940s be seen in the works of writers such as Frank Clune and Ernestine Hill.

What followed was a significant ‘thickening’ of middlebrow culture and at the same time its rejection by new, self-consciously modernist journals such as *Angry Penguins*. The early *Southerly*, aimed at a popular readership, the commercial literary magazine *Pertinent* (1940–

47), and another Ure Smith creation, *Australia: National Journal* (1939–47) provided homes. As did *ABC Weekly* (1939–59), the books feature of commercial radio magazine *Listener In* (1925–55), with its ‘Book of the Week’ section, usually on the Women’s Page, and the regular chats about ‘good books, good reading and the highbrow-lowbrow debate’ (142) that appeared in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*. Women readers, then, were at the centre of this middlebrow, which Carter figures against and through contemporary debates about nationalism so as to reconfigure a standard trope of Australian criticism across the lines of different kinds of often (but not always) gendered, unacknowledged readerships: ‘Rather than *radical* nationalism, or anti-radical nationalism for that matter, I would now want to argue for an Australian cultural history written around middlebrow nationalism’ (138).

Carter sees the mid-range middlebrow magazines as having been killed off by the professionalisation of Australian literary criticism in the mid to late 1940s. And with Menzies’ dream of urban modernity:

Class mobility was reconfigured away from cultural aspiration to household consumption. Middlebrow culture was disarticulated from the national, while modernism was tucked away as an academic tradition. Australian literary history was recast in the image of Patrick White, the least middlebrow of writers. (148)

By the 1960s literary magazines had become more serious, more specialised. Not that the middlebrow could be kept down for long. The popular success of writers such as Peter Carey, Tim Winton, Murray Bail, Helen Garner and David Malouf, and their international success, are argued for as evidence of a resurgence in the middlebrow. Robert Dessaix and Drusilla Modjeska are identified as authors who targeted an audience interested in ‘aesthetic, self-reflexive, morally serious’ books that were at the same time ‘desirable commodities’ aimed at ‘life-style consumers’ (149). And that sit alongside the success of middlebrow publications such as *Best Australian Essays* and *Quarterly Essay*, and the proliferation of literary festivals, prizes, reading groups. Where this has all ended up, according to Carter, is with a form of middlebrow literary reading understood through the lenses of ‘ethical seriousness,’ that is ‘self-fashioning’ that seeks to render class privilege as a form of social conscience, and a drive towards ‘a kind of cultural cosmopolitanism’ that can be fashioned through ‘discerning consumption,’ not least via the consumption of international contemporary bestsellers (151). As Carter writes, ‘Australian fiction now appears within this cosmopolitan array rather than any *national* ordering. Mostly that task is left to academics’ (152).

One of the things that drives *Always Almost Modern* is the way in which the book itself takes on the energy of an extraordinarily rich cultural field. Journals such as *All About Books*, Carter writes, emerged as a result of new readerships in an environment of a ‘superabundance’ of new books and was ‘the product of new relationships between “consumerist modernisation” and literary value’ (156). Social realist magazines such as *Strife*, meanwhile, sought to cut across the modalities of bourgeois fiction and orient themselves around the crises of the depression, fascism, and the spectre of world war. What was left was to document social facts in the wake of a perceived ‘crisis of liberal humanism’ (168), a task variously carried out by writers such as *Strife* co-editor Judah Waten, Eleanor Dark, Frank Hardy, Alan Marshall, John Morrison, Kylie Tennant, Jean Devanny, J.M. Harcourt, Katharine Susannah Pritchard, Ralph de Boissiere, and Dorothy Hewett. In another chapter, Barnard Eldershaw’s *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947) is read in the context of the urgent sense of social crisis that in the 1930s and 1940s gripped significant groups of literary intellectuals, as an instance of fiction that is both anti-utopian and utopian. And as an instance

of the complex intellectual ferments of the time, set against a crisis of liberalism and what the book called an “‘orgy of ideologies”, as ethical, political and historical languages appeared increasingly fragmented and disparate’ (193). Ralph de Boissiere’s *Crown Jewel*, published by the left-leaning Australasian Book Society in 1952, is read as a novel that, not quite Australian (it is set in Trinidad), nevertheless fitted easily enough within the generic frameworks of Australian social and socialist realism yet stands apart from them not least because of its brilliant, finely calibrated articulations of the overlaps between race and class. The novel also stood out because of the prominence it gave its female characters.

Carter also acknowledges the publishing phenomenon that was *They’re a Weird Mob* (1957), John O’Grady’s novel written in the guise of Italian migrant Nino Culotta. This was a hoax, as Carter argues, with a time limit, and yet without seeming limit in terms of book sales. O’Grady was outed by his publisher—the ubiquitous Ure Smith—within months of publication. Yet as Carter says, this outing only ‘doubled’ the book’s comic effect. *They’re a Weird Mob* was an immediate bestseller, selling 200,000 copies by mid-1959 and topping half a million copies sold in its first decade. By O’Grady’s death in 1981, sales were close to one million. His success was to a lesser degree repeated through numerous sequels as O’Grady struggled to escape and yet found himself drawn back into the Culotta persona. The meta-story of O’Grady-Culotta, as Carter says, is one of ‘whiteness passing as other’ (225), which O’Grady also attempted in his novel *No Kava for Johnny* (1961), told through the fictional Polynesian Ioane Papatiso. This meta-story is a parable for any number of subsequent Australian literary hoaxers, who, from Helen Demidenko to Leon Carmen to Norma Khouri, routinely act out racial otherness, though—and perhaps this says something about the evolving state of Australian modernities and national cultures—none have the generosity of O’Grady.

The final chapter takes us back to the question of nationalism. Carter outlines how the critique of nationalism that has defined Australian studies and Australian literary studies has unfolded in two ways, first as a recuperation of ‘writers, texts, genres excluded from the nationalist canon,’ second as the ‘recovery of an adequate “national” literary history against the exclusions of post-war ethico-formalist criticism’ (253). Projects that, in their turn, have been complicated by their own questioning and even rejection of the very meaning of nationalism, yet tacit acceptance of the category ‘nation.’ Feminist criticism, Carter argues, has been the ‘single most important force reshaping Australian literary studies since the 1970s, but much of its work, too, has inevitably been work on the nation’ (254). It’s a lesson in how, in the very rejection of nationalism, the idea of nation is persistent, a theme that Carter follows through the various modalities of post-1970s postmodern and postcolonial criticism.

The point is, Carter argues, that the persistence of ‘nation’ as ‘oppressive dominant’ against which critique must necessarily struggle, ‘is in danger of becoming an impediment’ (255). There’s something in this. Even despite the necessity for critique, the nation is a frame through which a variety of useful cultural work can be, and is, done. Carter brings this back to a question of how literature has been discussed and published—its commodification, marketisation, and changing cultural status, such that the ‘field of possibility in which literature operates has thus been fundamentally altered . . .’ (261). One change, for example, is the increased circulation of the national through the global, through the export of Australian fiction, music, cinema, visual art, and even critical theory. Yet to think globalisation through the local and the international, Carter argues, while usefully descriptive, results in a ‘disappearing of the nation’ that is ‘too slick by half’ (271). The national, he insists, ‘is a productive way of conceiving of an audience, a critical community, a “society,” a market, a

history, a polity' (271). That the nation has historically been understood as exploitative doesn't by necessity preclude other possibilities.

Ultimately the great virtue of *Almost Always Modern* is that it helps take Australian publishing studies out of their habitually empirical frame, oriented around deeds and dates, and at the same time helps rescue what might otherwise be seen as stodgy print histories from the critical margins. By understanding print histories in terms of Australian modernity *Almost Always Modern* is able to link them to broader national and transnational cultural histories. What might seem ephemeral turns out to be surprisingly central, even constitutive. One of the principal facilitators of Australian modernities, print culture, turns out to have been hiding in plain sight.

Mark Davis, University of Melbourne