

***The Mabo Turn in Australian Fiction* by Geoff Rodoreda. Oxford: Peter Land, 2018. Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, vol. 1. 268 pp. USD \$82.95 cloth.**

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Geoff Rodoreda earned his PhD from the University of Stuttgart, Germany, where he is now a lecturer in the English literature department. His first book, *The Mabo Turn in Australian Fiction*, is the result of Rodoreda's doctoral project, with portions of some chapters having appeared in journals and anthologies published in Australia and Germany. Prior to his academic pursuits, Rodoreda worked in Adelaide and Darwin as a journalist for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

While acknowledging that there exists a body of critical essays also critiquing creative works through a similar lens, Rodoreda positions *The Mabo Turn* as the first book-length survey on the profound affect which the landmark 1992 *Mabo v Queensland (No.2)* native title case has had on contemporary Australian prose fiction. More specifically, the book offers a typology of 'post-Mabo' Australian novels on the basis that, because '[i]t is a *literary* imaginary that works to describe, articulate, reflect, and ultimately represent post-Mabo discourse in Australia today' (4), representative literary works, devices and techniques must be mapped out.

As such, the book's four main chapters (not including the introduction) are organised into two parts. Part one, 'Writing after Mabo' consists of three thematically distinct chapters analyzing novels by non-Aboriginal authors. Chapter one identifies the 'four core post-Mabo novels' in chronological order, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*, Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Chapters two and three group what might be thought of as revisionist and reconciliation novels respectively. The single chapter constituting part two of the book, 'Writing beyond Mabo', shifts perspectives to consider the theme of sovereignty in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* and Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*.

While each work receives careful, in-depth attention, the chapters do not include much in the way of relational or comparative analysis between novels. The chapter on Aboriginal-authored novels is the exception, as here Rodoreda frontloads his readings with a brief theorisation of what he terms 'Sovereignty Novels'. Rodoreda's general approach is to extract a rather broadly defined theme or technique from one or two novels in relation to the chapter's overarching organizing principle. For example, because chapter two considers revisionist approaches to Australian history in the wake of the *Mabo* ruling, Rodoreda analyses Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide* and *Gould's Book of Fish* in terms of 'historiography'. Each chapter contains close readings of passages from four to six novels, thus opting to demonstrate the breadth of works conducive to this kind of study rather than offer sustained discussions on a selected few.

Indeed, *The Mabo Turn*'s greatest strength is that it acknowledges a multiplicity of authorial perspectives and, most importantly, does not ignore nor dismiss Aboriginal political difference articulated through those selected works of Wright, Scott, and Lucashenko. Too, Rodoreda's conceptualisation of these 'post-Mabo' novels is commendable in that, while the majority of the

book deals with well-known novels and authors (including Dorothy Hewett, Tim Winton, Thea Astley, and Michelle de Kretser in addition to those already named), *The Mabo Turn* also discusses those less well-known or as yet under-appreciated, such as Peter Mews's *Bright Planet* and Simone Lazaroo's *Lost River: Four Albums*. In these ways, Rodoreda breaks new ground for contemporary Australian literary studies.

Unfortunately, *The Mabo Turn* is also beset by a number of oversights and, at times, conveniently narrow arguments. The most pressing of these relates to the monograph's framework, which treats the 1992 *Mabo* ruling as a discrete occurrence without fully grounding it in the *longue durée* of native title policy in Australia. In addition to drastically understating the importance of the 1996 *Wik* ruling—which, it could be argued, has much greater bearing on contemporary pastoralist novels—Rodoreda does not account for pre-*Mabo* legislation such as *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd* (1971) and the resultant leasing scheme introduced by PM Billy McMahon in his politically ruinous 1972 Australia Day speech. Minimizing *Wik* is likely the more egregious of the two, though both could be said to weaken his argument that 'Mabo's fundamental challenge to understandings of land, the nation, identity and history have triggered a new era of narrative prose writing over the last quarter century' (25).

While that is certainly true, it is true to an extent. In other words, *Mabo* is undoubtedly a monumental event in the history of settler-Aboriginal history, but it does not exist in a vacuum. First, similar fundamental challenges occurred in novels prior to *Mabo*—Astley's *A Kindness Cup* (1974) and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) stand out as two prime examples. Furthermore, the 'post-Mabo' frame Rodoreda offers is unnecessarily limited to one particular ruling within a decade that includes not only the *Wik* ruling but also the Native Title Act (1993) and subsequent rollbacks under Howard's so-called 'ten point plan' amendment act in 1998. Additionally, the *Mabo* ruling is treated here as existing somewhat outside of the much larger reconciliation movement from which it was born—indeed, Keating's famous Redfern speech makes it clear that *Mabo* is but one piece (albeit a substantial one) of his vision for reconciliation.

Rodoreda's insistence on 'post-Mabo' may be born out of the need to distinguish his work from that of previous scholarship, the most obvious of these being Liliana G. Zavaglia's *White Apology and Apologia: Australian Novels of Reconciliation* (2016) which offers a more thorough historical and critical theorisation, as well as more in-depth analysis of single works, than does *The Mabo Turn*. Not surprisingly, Zavaglia's book includes chapter-length analyses of three of Rodoreda's four 'core post-Mabo novels.'

Other curious omissions and narrow arguments involve gaps in representation of writers and texts. That said, it would be unfair to praise *The Mabo Turn* for including less-studied works and then bemoan the absence of a handful of well-recognized writers. Nor do I mean to suggest that any one critical monograph taking on a project the size of Rodoreda's could ever be considered exhaustive. Rather, I point briefly to a few specific instances of contention.

In making his case for the existence of 'the Mabo turn' in Australian literature, Rodoreda overstates Patrick White's influence—by no means an easy feat—by asserting that, up until White's death in 1990, literary scholars struggled throughout the 1980s and early 1990s to find anything new to say

about contemporary Australian literature. Quite the contrary, this period was remarkably productive, as scholars such as Terry Goldie and, in particular, Alan Lawson engaged with then still-emerging post-colonial theory to popularize transnational comparative analysis between Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Neither of these scholars nor their influential works, which straddle pre- and post-Mabo designations, are included in *The Mabo Turn*. The omission of Goldie's *Fear and Temptation* (1989) and Lawson's "Proximities: From Asymptote to Zeugma" (2000), as well as Jeanine Leane's "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature" (2014) are particularly unfortunate given that all offer typologies that would have only enriched *The Mabo Turn* even as they might have made messy some of the neat readings it offers.

Other notable absences include prolific Australian novelists Keneally, Bryce Courtenay and Peter Carey (with the exclusion of a quick reference to *Oscar & Lucinda*), all of whom published internationally recognized novels during the years under consideration in *The Mabo Turn*. Presuming their exclusion occurs on the grounds that these works did not directly or meaningfully engage with the *Mabo* decision, I again question if the limited focus on *Mabo* specifically does not then limit the scope Rodoreda's critical apparatus. One would hope that here, too, there would be space to explore the reasons behind authorial silence on native title during and after the 1990s.

The Mabo Turn in Australian Fiction comes at an exciting time to study Australia's creative works, evinced by the fact that it is the first volume in Peter Lang's new series Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Rodoreda's work here makes an important gesture toward the necessity of using the novel, and I would add the many forms of Australian literary expression, to discuss recent political, social and cultural developments in settler-Indigenous relations. In that way, it gives those of us working with contemporary literatures of Australia ample material with which to engage in our own scholarship.

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