

Julianne Lamond. *Lohrey*. Melbourne University Press, 2022. Contemporary Australian Writers. 173 pages. AUS\$29.99. ISBN: 9780522878936.

It has taken me quite a long time to write this short book. It has been with me through family crises, house moves, bushfire and pandemic, in and out of teaching semesters and family dinners and departmental meetings. Through it all I have been reading and thinking about these novels, bringing them into the same space and opening up conversations between them. This book is an attempt to represent these conversations on the page, so that you can read [Amanda Lohrey's] work and continue them. (Lamond, 137)

Most will be familiar with Amanda Lohrey's Miles Franklin-winning 2020 novel *The Labyrinth*, but many will not have explored the rich body of work this author has produced over the several decades of her career. Julianne Lamond's book-length study is both an introduction to Lohrey for readers and academics, as well as a call for scholars of Australian literature to pay due attention to this significant Australian writer.

A quality that Lamond returns to throughout her analysis is Lohrey's dauntlessness. She is unflinching in her creative vision and her ability to represent points of friction in social and personal life with startling precision. Lamond says, "hers is a clear, bold gaze which looks at the reader 'so directly and with a vision so sharp the fog lifts'" (137). *Lohrey* celebrates this unique writer's approach to representing an Australian life that is at once deeply political and deeply personal.

The book is structured by four key thematic elements and motifs that recur in Lohrey's work: home renovations, gender, fire, and reading. Lamond shows how Lohrey's work, when taken together, represents a sustained engagement with key dilemmas of contemporary human life, like how to live in relation to others and to one's environment. By considering recurring elements in the body of work and tracing how they develop across it, this approach reveals fascinating intellectual nuances and artistic beauty.

The introductory chapter sketches out a biography of Lohrey, with a hefty focus on her proximity to and involvement in Australian politics. Lamond articulates the uneasy place Lohrey's work has occupied in relation to conversations around the value of literature, the form of the novel, and gender and writing. Although Lohrey has produced a significant corpus since she began publishing in the 1980s, she is far from a household name and has been underexplored by critics and scholars of Australian literature. Lamond posits that Lohrey's idiosyncratic and uncompromising approach has meant that critics and readers alike may not know where to place or what to do with her novels. Lohrey's fiction may seem at once too realistic and not realistic enough, too political, or not political enough to sit easily within the genre of literary realism that attracts judgements of literary merit. But this is where the great value and complexity of her work lies. Lamond characterises Lohrey, through discussion of her life, work, and reception, as a writer located in interstitial spaces.

The most interesting part of this discussion explores how Lohrey uses the unknown, the numinous, and the spiritual to set up a specific relationship with the reader in which the work withholds or avoids narrative intimacy and coherence to encourage the reader to "lean towards" the story and fill in gaps. The idea is that by refusing to follow novelistic conventions that tend to clarify characters' realities and contextualise their inner worlds, and instead mystifying them and leaving gaps, the reader is engaged in a process of questioning and speculation. Lamond says: "[I]n Lohrey's novels we never have the sense that we know her characters fully, or

indeed that the novel does” (29). And Lohrey describes this approach as “setting up more of a conversational or speculative relationship with the reader.” She says, “it’s a way of saying to the reader, ‘there is some mystery here, I’m not quite across it, what do you think?’” (29). This strategy is positioned by Lamond as one reason Lohrey’s work has found an uneasy place in the literary landscape and has been—until *The Labyrinth*—relatively unsung. It is also one of the things that makes her work fascinating. In addition to the overall thematic structure of the work, Lamond introduces the key foci for this book: firstly, the reception of Lohrey’s work and what it tells us about contemporary literary culture; secondly, the interrelation of politics and the personal in Lohrey’s work; and thirdly, how to understand elements of the spiritual, numinous, and speculative—unconventional for contemporary realist fiction—in Lohrey’s work, and how to make space for them in a consideration of literariness, within a literary culture that can incline towards masculinism and conservatism of the kind not often friendly to mysticism. Here, Lamond opens out strategies for interacting with and understanding works that readers and critics alike may not have known what to do with.

The first theme that Lamond examines is the project of renovation in several of Lohrey’s works. She demonstrates that Lohrey’s fiction explores how political disenfranchisement under late capitalism leads into contemporary desires associated with projects of the self, and that home improvement projects can be understood as an extension of the self. Here, Lamond explores how the political and personal affect of conviction emerges and shapes the lives of Lohrey’s characters. Given how commonly emotion is overlooked in both the hard lines of politics and assessments of literary merit, Lamond importantly explores questions about political feelings and how they shape both public and private life in Lohrey’s novels.

The second chapter meditates on a particular construction of masculinity that reappears in Lohrey’s work, described by Lamond as a “warrior” fantasy or ideal: “a kind of masculinity that ‘gets the job done.’ It prides itself on its lack of encumbrance. Solitude. There is no concern for the minutiae of life” (61). And this interest opens out into a broader consideration of the ways in which Lohrey’s fiction examines “how gender structures our lives and aspirations” (62). Lamond’s analysis positions work and the workplace as a site of rich tensions through which to draw out structures of gender, class and identity. Lamond convincingly argues that Lohrey’s work offers a complex and nuanced portrayal of the interplay between misogyny and capitalism that illuminates affects which structure gendered identities and embodiment. A highlight in this chapter is Lamond’s analysis of a scene from *The Reading Group* where a tennis court becomes “both a cage and a stage” for a battle between competing models of masculinity.

In a timely and resonant chapter titled “Fire,” Lamond argues that Lohrey uses the motif of fire to “engage with ethical and political questions about how individuals feel, and take responsibility for others, especially in relation to environmental crisis” (88). In this chapter, Lamond examines how Lohrey’s works—especially *Vertigo* and *The Labyrinth*—represent and engage with the natural world. This engagement is contextualised by climate catastrophe, class, environmental politics, and flawed settler colonial aspirations of occupation. Lamond shows how these novels both contemplate and critique existing literary traditions of writing about Australia’s natural environment, specifically the mode of the pastoral. Lohrey, Lamond demonstrates, uses fire as a device to explore human psychology and a politics of crisis, especially climate crisis, in *Vertigo*, and the agency of the natural world in *The Labyrinth*. Lamond argues that Lohrey writes against anthropocentric and Arcadian models of the pastoral, and instead presents a mode of pastoralism which “models an engagement with nature that involves a ceding of authority to it” (118). This critique is rich and convincing and will be of interest to the many literary scholars pursuing studies related to ecocriticism, climate fiction, and literary representations of nature.

The final analytical chapter looks at how, what, and why Lohrey's characters read. Lohrey often depicts characters in the act of reading. Such scenes taken together form a fascinating study of how reading figures in relationships between people and their environment, and in relationships with one another, as well as ideas about selfhood, time, and transformation. Novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Madame Bovary* become sites of self-reflection that change characters' trajectories and sense of themselves and others. Lamond skilfully draws threads between disparate characters from Lohrey's novels to show reading and its connective power as a central thematic concern that relates to Lohrey's other foci: politics, relationships, gender, and the natural environment.

The book concludes with an interview between Lohrey and Lamond, conducted in the first instance in 2018 on the streets of Hobart, and then continuing virtually over the course of the pandemic. The merits of including an interview with an author in a scholarly book about their works are clear: biographical methods can enrich literary analysis by allowing scholars to join new dots and flesh out the connections between life and literature via the figure of the author. Indeed, many of the ideas Lamond develops in her reading of Lohrey's fiction are enriched by inclusion and cross-referencing of autobiographical details and ideas and arguments from Lohrey's nonfiction writing. In a cultural climate deeply concerned with voice, artistic agency and meaning across a range of contexts, it seems important, too, that authors' voices are considered as an element of literary analysis and scholarship. However, the interview was, for me, the least interesting part of this volume. It covers many of the topics and ideas explored in the other chapters, but in less depth. It fails to intrigue in the way that Lamond's scholarship and Lohrey's writing do; it may, however, prove a useful basis for further studies of Lohrey's work.

Throughout, Lamond's style as a scholar is part of what makes this book so readable and fascinating. Her narrative voice leads us through complex ideas and sophisticated arguments without ever becoming overpowering, and she uses her lived experience and observations to emphasise the continued relevance and urgency of the literary works under consideration. These autobiographical insertions never distract from the narrative. By contrast, they are a deeply engaging mode that illuminates new aspects of the novels and brings literary theory and analysis to life in a way that deepens understanding.

This volume made me remember why I first became enamoured with literary analysis. It reminded me that literary texts weave together with enchanted threads the meaning and magic of human life, and that through analysis the wonder is unspooled and laid bare—a process that increases rather than erodes the sense of enchantment. *Lohrey* offers a spark of revelation on almost every page, and when read cover-to-cover, gives one a deepening understanding and a proliferating pleasure. Just as importantly, it places Amanda Lohrey among Australia's most significant writers, and opens the way for greater scholarly engagement with her works.

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