

**David Carter (editor). *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*.
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There was a time when the study of Australian literature was the wild west, something that took place beyond the institutions, along the fringes and margins of journals, little magazines and newspapers. If the current institutional decay of the humanities and arts within universities is leading to the new-found surety of the discipline fraying a touch at the edges, it is nonetheless evident that the study of Australian literature has come a long way. And yet, it remains a remarkable fact that—whether we consider its origin point in those early days where men and women of letters compiled rudimentary histories, from the appointment of the first lecturer in Australian literature in 1941, or the appointment of the first professor of Australian literature in 1962 (G. A. Wilkes, see Carter 144)—no one across that great span of time has attempted to tell a standalone history of its most popular form: the novel. Given the rapid expansion of Australian publishing in the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first, the nature of this task has become more herculean with each passing year. With the publication of *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*, edited by David Carter, the long wait is over.

Herman Melville once described how writers “rise and swell with their subject” (474); in rising to meet its task this *History* has swelled—at seven hundred and fifty pages divided into thirty-nine chapters—to leviathan-like proportions. There is an old joke in Australian literature, a quip that riffs on the title of Xavier Herbert’s Great Australian Novel (GAN) contender from another era, the gargantuan 1971 Miles Franklin-winning 1,463-page epic, *Poor Fellow My Country* (discussed in Chapters 16, 18 and 36 of the *History*): “poor fellow my reader.” Upon the arrival of this hefty edition upon my doorstep, I was tempted to exhale “poor fellow my reviewer.” However, as Nick Jose has already noted, the reviewer of this history is in the unusual position of reading the edition from cover to cover; with its disparate chapters and areas of focus and its resistance to telling a master narrative, it appears well designed for standalone use by students, researchers and educators.

The size is rather apt, for as Paul Sharrad’s chapter “From Bunyip to Boom” details, in the mid-century search for the near mythical GAN, sprawling prose to match an expansive continent became a given prerequisite (304); a seemingly outdated notion which has perhaps found new merit in what Eugenia Flynn’s identifies, in her chapter, “A (Sovereign) Body of Work,” as the recent turn of Indigenous storytellers to “co-opt the literary fiction novel form” (582–83). Novels such as Kim Scott’s *Benang* and in particular, Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, which is unsurprisingly much referenced in this edition, show how this might extend to the GAN itself. One benefit of this edition’s expansive coverage is this ability to make connections between disparate parts of Australian novelistic history for the first time. Tony Hughes-d’Aeth overtly does this in his outstanding chapter, “Nation and Environment in the Twentieth-Century Novel,” unexpectedly connecting elements of the “vitalistic environmentalism” of the 1930s (217), stirred by a period of local and international chaos, to Wright’s Aboriginal worldview expressed in her novels, increasingly informed by not only the crisis-inducing policies of the settler-colonial state, but the Anthropocene.

Key to the expansive coverage of this edition is not merely its size, but its approach; rather than attempting to tell a structured narrative history of the novel, David Carter has instead gathered forty-six of Australian literature’s finest scholarly minds and let them “have at it” across thirty-nine chapters. Although a loose chronology underlies the chapters, they all sit as largely independent pieces of work, ensuring that reading this history is like ascending a thousand (or in this case thirty-nine) dusty literary plateaus. Each author assembles their own framework and range of novels to discuss, naturally related to their own area of specialty—a

method that ensures each chapter is an original piece, written by an Ozlit scholar in their element. In this sense the collection does not just fall into extending the established history of Australian literature to cover the novel form but reshapes and expands it by including new and emerging research and perspectives.

Carter's Introduction acknowledges that "maintaining Australian literary studies" within universities is returning to being a "struggle" in recent years (7), a situation that enhances the achievement of this collection, even as it remains largely undiscussed. The current situation of Australian literature and the novel has become somewhat disjointed. A wider range of works and voices has never existed, and yet, as Emmett Stinson elucidates in a chapter titled "The Economics of the Literary Novel," the literary novel is now almost exclusively the province of independent publishers (407–08). Meanwhile, the hollowing out of the universities goes on ruthlessly apace, as newspapers, arts institutions and publications undergo a similar process. All this while, across the country, underfunded, precarious little magazines, and minute local scholarly journals are left to carry the cultural load as they struggle to compete in an internationally weighted ranking system. Stinson's contrasting of the fortunes of David Malouf and Gerald Murnane shows just how important shrinking university and school curriculums can be for sales of the literary novel (414).

Siloed off from each other by the great middling of social media, the unsavoury penetration of marketing and managerial types into even the arts and academia under late-neoliberal modernity, the cultural scape within which Australian literature is written and critiqued appears, at least from below, to be increasingly a wasteland assuming GAN proportions. One humorous *Meanjin* article recently likened the study of Australian literature, an increasingly niche interest, to a group therapy session, in a bomb shelter, beneath this wasteland (Marlborough). Meanwhile, Sydney University, once the symbolic home of Australian literature thanks to formerly hosting a Chair position and offering an Australian literature major, has, according to their venerable student newspaper, *Honi Soit*, given way to the "great Australian emptiness" (Griffiths).

Therefore, the achievement of Carter's *History* is even more remarkable: out of this dusty cultural expanse, he has assembled a rare collection of literary gunslingers—names of renown, old warhorses, and rising stars. There is the last (academic) Chair standing, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, but also a couple of former ones returning, as though for one last hurrah, in Philip Mead and Robert Dixon. There are old hands, who are the backbone of the Australian literature ecosystem (including ASAL and the scholarly journals) such as Roger Osborne, Fiona Morrison, Tanya Dalziell, Nicholas Birns and Emily Potter. Then there are familiar established names known for their varied areas of speciality and rigour such as Michael R. Griffiths, Jessica White, Emmett Stinson and Lynda Ng. Finally, there is an exciting cohort of emerging scholars, such as Meg Brayshaw, Eugenia Flynn and Emily Yu Zong, who, among others, are expanding modern Australian literary studies beyond its already mapped horizons.

Across the vast array of chapters, the selection of standouts is, of course, highly subjective. The first one hundred pages of the collection expand knowledge of the nineteenth century Australian novel, exemplified by Katherine Bode, Sarah Galletly and Carol Hetherington's chapter, "Beyond Britain and the Book," that radically recasts our understanding of nineteenth century publishing. The long twentieth century dominates the next four hundred pages, containing a wealth of material, including aforementioned chapters by Hughes-d'Aeth and Sharrad, while Griffiths's survey of "Whiteness, Aboriginality and Representation" grabbed my attention for its expansiveness and rigour. Mid-century female writers, the city, suburbia, and realism rise repeatedly to the surface, before Geoff Rodoreda's chapter on "*Mabo*, History and Sovereignty" marks a definitive turn, foreshadowed by Elizabeth McMahon's declaration of the "End of History" and universality in the mid-century, as the novel form fragments. What had had the appearance of an ever-widening river, suddenly

proliferates out into a delta of distributaries. Flynn's aforementioned chapter combines with Iva Polak's work on "Indigenous Futurism" to challenge what Australian literature is with the emergence of an Indigenous canon. Yu Zong's and Jumana Bayeh's chapters do likewise for the Asian Australian and the Arab Australian novel respectively. Peppered amongst such foundational pieces, unexpected chapters sparkle. Jessica Gildersleeve's effort on "Grunge Literature" challenges understandings of genre and Christos Tsiolkas, while Sascha Morrell's "The Novel Road to the Global South" explores the problematic of "Australia" and the "South" by taking the caustic soda to Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan's supposed taint of the "underdog" (600); amidst such works, Nicholas Birns's enjoyable "The Fortunes of the Miles Franklin" appears decidedly old fashioned. Despite the collection's resistance to the conventional forms employed to construct a history, Lynda Ng's excellent final chapter, which recasts all non-Indigenous Australian writing as migrant writing, succeeds in feeling like a culminating final flourish.

In any broad history oversights are inevitable. The lack of a structured approach ensures that we tend towards each author's academic areas of specialisation, framed by new approaches. The canon remains largely covered, but in a distributed manner that might alienate a reader unfamiliar with Australian literature. More classic spaces, highly relevant to understanding the Australian tradition (the bush and outback), get a similar distributed treatment. Barring Hughes-d'Aeth's chapter and Emily Potter and Brigid Magner's "The Regional Novel in Australia," an environmental and regional focus is also missing, one that might have explored Australia's influential range of climatic regions, including the desert and the tropics. Some important authors are also inevitably missed or dealt with in the briefest of terms, including notable female novelists Helen Garner and Janette Turner Hospital, while the failure to mention Nobel Prize winner John Coetzee until Ng's final chapter signals a lingering, yet fundamental, uncertainty over what constitutes an Australian novel. Nonetheless, such a vast undertaking was always going to have oversights and blind spots, and the tensions are largely productive.

Perhaps the true mark of a collection such as this is its enduring value to scholars and students—in this regard, this reviewer can attest, in the lengthy process of putting this review together, to having already utilised and cited a number of chapters. This collection successfully expands the known history of the Australian novel: from its serialised beginnings, stories of bushrangers, convicts and the gold rush now suddenly made known again, through to the current luminescent renaissance of Aboriginal literature and the ever-more kaleidoscopic tales of a migrant nation.

Samuel Cox, University of Adelaide

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