

The Reading Sickness

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At an early age, despite the dearth of reading material at home and at the local school, I was infected with what Patrick White called “the reading sickness”. Like White, and others who have caught the bug, I was “soon in a fever—while not understanding half of what I read—but reading and reading”(74). I still have the bug. Like many avid readers, I justify my obsession, not just because it gives me pleasure and information, but because, like Dorothy Green, I believe that literature forces us “to examine our hidden motives for doing things, to analyse our prejudices and convictions, to clean up the undergrowth which always threatens to suffocate human institutions and practices”(3). I value literature for its subversive character, its capacity to upend my comfortable mental habits and to suggest other possibilities for thinking about and living my life. And like Green, I find such writing in many places, not just in works we might describe as literary fiction—although such fiction remains my preferred reading material.

White’s description of reading as a sickness might, on first hearing, seem an odd way for him to describe an activity he so clearly cherished—and one on which his success as a writer ultimately depended. I hesitate to ascribe to the phrase a meaning that White may not have intended, but given his propensity for mocking the Establishment, it may be that he meant us to infer that reading, as a disease, could “infect” people to see and act differently, even strangely; so that, like lepers, they stood outside the boundaries of society.

Green believed writers should be social critics and admired White as the “voice of our country’s conscience” while White himself held that “artists . . . if they are to amount to anything, must be prepared to take risks, to jump over the precipice every day of their lives, in an attempt to illuminate and perhaps alleviate the human dilemma. Alternately, you settle for the security and the congealing comforts of tradition”(75). So too for readers—better to be afflicted with the fever of sickness than to stagnate in mediocrity. It may be that it is this unsettling characteristic of reading—the fever which turns away some contemporary Australians; they prefer being relaxed and comfortable.

My diet was very different from White's—my parents could not afford many books and, in any case, while willing, didn't have the exposure to literature to distinguish quality writing from pulp. So I read everything I could lay my hands on; anything printed would serve—the back of the Weeties packet, my mother's *Women's Weekly*, the *Farmer's Weekly*, comics, the bible, the Medical Encyclopaedia, Enid Blyton and, my salvation, the monthly School Papers. Although saturated with an unquestioning devotion to Britain, the School Papers also introduced me to the possibility of Australian writing. In Western Australia, in the year I started school, the School Papers carried stories (mostly nostalgic historical rural adventures) about the wreck of the *Batavia* (sanitised), free settlers migrating to Australia to take up sheep farming at Roebourne, a shark attack on a horse exercising in the surf, a train robbery at the local siding and a few poems, one titled "Songs of the South West" by C. Hilson.

*I'll sing you songs of orchids of every form and hue;
Of scented brown boronia and leschenaultia blue;
The hovea's deep purple; the myrtles peach-like tone;
And of the golden glory in wattle blossoms shown.*

And so on.

Re-reading this doggerel and these simple stories reminded me of the taken-for-granted nature of the white, settler societies I grew up in—not an Aboriginal in sight, except at the margins; black trackers made occasional appearances, but never as anything but bit players.

My reading diet improved only marginally at the Catholic boarding school I later attended. Apart from the set texts, which included the *Merchant of Venice*, the library cupboard at the back of the room was filled with Georgette Heyer's historical novels, various lives of the saints and one or two works from the Brontës and Jane Austen. Certainly nothing unsuitable for young ladies and almost nothing, apart from Vance and Nettie Palmer's collections of short stories, which spoke to Australian preoccupations and images. It's little wonder that when I finally got to University and (briefly) studied literature I was hungry for what I had come to regard as "serious literature", a category I could not have defined which did not, as I remember, include Australian writing. I had the very good fortune to encounter both Dorothy Hewett and Fay Zwicky as tutors, an experience which convinced me that the Australians could write of universal human predicaments through the lens of Australian experience. I was excited by White and Randolph Stow, amongst others, and my affection and admiration for Australian writing remains undiminished.

I speak to you today then as a reader, one who still burns with the “reading sickness”, but who has little experience, beyond one exciting year, of the formal study of Australian literature. I am the amateur in your ranks but, as you know, such incomplete understanding rarely stops anyone holding strong opinions about writing.

I know that the proliferation of writers’ festivals and book clubs has led some to conclude that Australian literature now enjoys a secure place in our civic and cultural life. But there are worrying signs that this is an overly favourable assessment. While we seem to be reading as many books as ever, more of them appear to be formulaic fiction or how-to-guides for managing our real estate, our children, our physical appearance and our relationships—in no particular order and with little discernible difference in style (or sometimes in content) between them. Sales of Australian fiction fell from \$215 million in 2001-2 to \$73 million in 2003-4 and very few such books, even those by well-regarded writers, sell more than 1000 copies. Royalties and fees for Australian-originated books are also down. First time and unknown authors really struggle. Perhaps as a result (and because of the dominance of the ubiquitous Bookscan data), major publishers appear to be vacating the field, producing only 32 books from Australian authors in 2004 compared with 60 in 1996, with most books enjoying only modest promotion and a brief shelf life.

As Jeremy Fisher suggested in his review of current publishing practice for the Australian Society of Authors, “the creation of a new writer is a slow process that does not fit well with publishers’ desires for immediate profits”(6). Reflecting on the majors’ refusal to publish his (now) award winning *Shanghai Dancing*, Brian Castro told Rosemary Neill that the big companies were “killing literature” because “everything is about the bottom line”. Mark Davis has predicted that if these trends continue, “the activities of reading, studying, writing and publishing literary fiction will increasingly become—if they aren’t already—the preserve of a rump of ‘true believers’”. Whatever else is happening, it seems that the major publishers feel no obligation to add to the canon of Australian literature, although some small independent publishers appear to be stepping into the breach to help provide a more “healthy variety of Australian narratives”(6).

As a committed reader of Australian literature, I am dismayed at the apparent decline in readership and interest in Australian literature. Is it that there are fundamental weaknesses in the quality of the writing that are turning readers away? If the absence of young male readers is anything to go by, the style and content of current fiction appears not to appeal to a significant portion of

the potential audience. Some critics suggest that the 80s and 90s produced some excessively enthusiastic promotion of books that turned out to be of indifferent quality. The resulting disenchantment is said to have deterred some readers from further sampling Australian writing. Others point to the decline in the quality of editing in some publishing houses. Or perhaps it is, as Dorothy Green observed in the 80s, that “there are not nearly enough readers capable of reading [books] properly” (12) or as Ivor Indyk says, “It’s not just that publishers have lost the will. Readers have lost the will too.”

Philip Roth warned, in response to even more drastic declines in readership for literary fiction in the U.S., that the danger for all novels and novelists is that there soon may be no audience left. “I don’t think there’s a decline of the novel”, he said in an interview, “so much as the decline of the readership. There’s been a drastic decline, even a disappearance, of a serious readership. That’s inescapable. We can’t fail to see it. It’s also inescapable, given the pressures in the society. That’s a tragedy. By readers, I don’t mean people who pick up a book, once in a while. By readers, I mean people who when they are at work during the day think that after dinner tonight and after the kids are in bed, I’m going to read for two hours. That’s what I mean. No. 2, these people do it three or four nights a week for two and half, three hours, and while they do it they don’t watch television or answer the phone.”

“Whether it is a matter of television, mass culture or shifts in the way people work and live,” Roth said, “there is a change in the mental landscape having to do with concentration, and that is what’s responsible for the declining readership . . . For me, concentration is a pleasure, but it’s no longer thought of that way by most people.” “It’s what I have instead of religion,” he said. “Some people believe in God, and I believe in the reader. But I don’t want my faith tested too strongly.” Since he gave this interview in the early 90s, U.S. readership has plummeted. His faith has been severely tested.

Are Australian readers similarly lacking in concentration span; afflicted with another illness, the inability to do the work of imagination, to expend the necessary time and energy to transform the words on the page into a created world? Perhaps we’re suffering from an epidemic of Omega 3 deficiency or a surfeit of Red Dye 2 in our diets. Is it that the immediacy of the visual world of TV and DVDs and video games corrodes our capacity—and our desire—to be partners with writers in an imagined universe? It appears not to be an aversion to reading *per se*—we’re still reading non-fiction, which outsells local fiction by four to one—but rather a retreat from the literary novel. Are we so fatigued that we prefer instant satisfaction, slouched on the couch, choosing a product that comes fully assembled, requiring little or no

effort and only limited interaction in the space between reader and writer? Literary Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and novelist, Malcolm Knox, in reflecting on the collapsing market for literary fiction, worried that “people are less willing to be challenged as readers” and that “people are exhausted by their daily lives”.

Perhaps fewer Australian novels are being read because we are no longer being educated to read fiction. Ivor Indyk, Professor in Writing and Society at the University of Sydney and founder of Giramondo publishing, argues that part of the current malaise is the disappearance from schools and universities of Australian literature as a stand-alone discipline. This is tricky territory, I know, and I’m not an automatic adherent of the “read more classics” school of thought, but I think it is true that there are too few young people emerging from our education system with any knowledge of Australian literature or much of an appetite for reading Australian writing, much as was the case when I was at school. In 50 years we may have come full circle.

Or it may be that reading itself is less valued than it once was or that it has never been much valued—many Australians are uncomfortable with the exercise of the mind and even suspicious of arty types. This is reflected in the lack of formal public recognition for literary achievement. For example, of the 50 recipients of the Australian of the Year from 1960, twelve were sportspeople and only two were writers—Manning Clark and Patrick White. The Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, which might well be considered the literary equivalent of the Commonwealth Games, is virtually unknown outside literary circles and certainly never the subject of national celebration. Peter Carey has won it twice and between 1998 and 2002, four of the five winners were Australian. A good test of the currency of Australian literary achievement would be to ask the Prime Minister or the Treasurer who won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize this year. Of course, some do notice these achievements—the leader writer of the Australian trumpeted after Geraldine Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize, that this, and other recent awards to Australian writers, meant that “literary fiction is winning the day over the post-modernist crusade to crush literary appreciation”. Maybe that’s the problem!

It has been obvious for some time that our current leaders seem to place no value at all on literature, Australian or otherwise, or the arts more generally. And much as I’m loath to admit it, the talk and behaviour of our political leaders—what they endorse and what they ignore—influences and amplifies our own tastes. I find it amazing, for example, that there was no public gesture of welcome from the Prime Minister following the decision by

Nobel Prize and Booker Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee to become an Australian citizen. Nor have I seen any celebration beyond the arts world of the fact that the only two novelists to win the Booker Prize twice are both Australian (Peter Carey for *Oscar and Lucinda*: 1988, and *True History of the Kelly Gang*: 2001; and J. M. Coetzee for *Life & Times of Michael K*: 1983, and *Disgrace*: 1999).

I'm not as unkind as Mungo McCallum who suggested that the last theatre Prime Minister Howard attended was to have his tonsils removed and the last book he read was the "Boy Scouts Book of Knots". But in trawling through the acres of newsprint and transcripts which capture the PM's every utterance, I have found almost no evidence of him taking pleasure in reading fiction, quoting admiringly from his favourite writers (though he says he likes Dickens) or celebrating the achievements of our literary high flyers. Such adulation is reserved for the cricketers—and more recently the magicians of the round ball, whose skills he has belatedly discovered.

And this can be no accident from a leader so given to calculation; a leader who weighs each word meticulously before speaking; this is not an oversight, but a message meant to be received and understood. We are meant to conclude that the arts have no great value and artists are, in any case, forever tarnished by their association with a previous administration as well as being beyond the realm of "mainstream Australia".

In one of his rare incursions into the world of arts and education, sounding off about "post-modern rubbish" and "gobbledygook"—"there's high quality literature and there's rubbish"—the PM was asked to nominate his favourite contemporary novel. *Bonfire of the Vanities*, he replied, as he did when asked a similar question a few years ago. Enough said. (Although, in parenthesis, I think Margaret Sankey deserves the last word on this. After the publicity given to Howard's diatribe on postmodernism, she observed that Howard's "moral relativism" clearly marks him as a postmodern character, particularly given his tendency to take "lots of different standpoints on different occasions" and his apparent disavowal of a unitary moral framework. While the PM is clearly uncomfortable with the idea that there is more than one way of looking at the world, if we judge his actions, his "ducking and weaving" as Sankey puts it, we could conclude that, in that sense at least, he is a thoroughly postmodern man.)

It may be that some of us no longer enjoy or have never learned to enjoy reading fiction—perhaps because we fear the contagion of ideas in these fear-drenched times. Some Australians clearly feel threatened by any challenge to

their treasured certainties, preferring the one-dimensional world so beloved of our Prime Minister. One set of values to define us; one identity—"Australian" everyman with his cricket bat and Gallipoli nostalgia; one image of the nation, all virtue and no vice; one account of our history and settlement; rigid prescriptions for acceptable behaviour and thought, the real face of political correctness. In this world, literature, which Derek Attridge calls an ethically charged event, becomes a dangerous force because of its capacity to carry the attentive reader through the intense experiences of respect, love, trust, and generosity and to direct these feelings to unexpected others rather than their being contained within the safe confines of family and nation.

These empathic responses are not much in fashion these days and can get you into serious trouble with right-wing commentators and other Establishment enforcers who increasingly occupy positions of authority in the arts world—the Boards of the ABC and the Australia Council being prime examples. The government went to a great deal of trouble to ensure that it would be very difficult for anyone to identify with the refugees on the Tampa or in the detention centres—we were simply prohibited from seeing them or any humanising images of them. After the Cronulla riots, the Prime Minister reassured us, saying, "I do not accept there is underlying racism in this country" and expressing his disappointment that the riots had been given "the tag line of racially motivated".

Apparently we are supposed to just feel good about ourselves rather than face the fact that the rioters themselves, on both sides, clearly identified race as central to their actions, with slogans like "ethnic cleansing unit", "wog free zone" and so on. Anyone who dissents from this comforting denial is likely to be abused—labelled variously unAustralian, chardonnay-sipping socialists, members of the chattering classes or the compassion industry, elites out of touch with mainstream Australians, wallowing in the black-armband view of history. In these attacks, the reflex anti-intellectualism of many Australians is reinforced and justified. Some, especially those close to the government, seem so fearful of any criticism of the prevailing worldview that they move into overdrive to intimidate those who are delivering the message. As David Marr has observed, "this is a government that is extraordinarily sensitive to criticism", particularly from the "taxpayer funded" arts. Paradoxically, the same people who pointedly ignore literary achievement are well aware of its power.

Some have charged that this climate has produced a distinct unwillingness by local novelists to engage in any serious rendering of contemporary moods and preoccupations at odds with the official line, to tell us what we may not

want to hear, take us where we may not want to go. Our imagined history, according to this view, offers a safe retreat from having to deal with tough up-close-and-personal social questions; history allows us to keep our distance from bruising self-awareness. But the truth is that such historical settings, in skilled hands, can illuminate the present, as well as the past. Neil Armfield argues that artists “must dig up the bones that the layers of quicklime spread by the relaxed and comfortable society have not quite managed to cover” and that this fear of what might be uncovered is what makes Australians—including some politicians—so uncomfortable with the arts.

This apparent preoccupation with historical settings and themes (*The Secret River*, *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*) clearly annoys some historians, such as Mark McKenna and John Hirst, but it may be accurately tapping into the Zeitgeist, embodying a necessary corrective to the official self-serving “historical mythology” which denies the experience of conflict and violence in settler communities. It is precisely because the mirror is distorted by political stratagem that writers keep returning to the past, not to reclaim territory in the so-called “culture wars”, but to invite a deeper understanding; “to subvert the *status quo* by resisting official versions of it, then reconstructing it so others can see it anew”.

McKenna is right to point to “the dangers that arise when novelists (and reviewers) claim for fiction, at the expense of history, a superior ability to provide empathy and historical understanding”—just read Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* to understand his point. And he’s justified too in ticking off those novelists who tempt their readers to read fiction as history, but I agree with Malouf that well-written “fictive history” allows us to come to terms with “what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now”.

This need not be an exclusive claim, but simply one that recognises that writing that powers the imagination will allow us to reach a deeper understanding of ourselves; not to lay to rest our enduring curiosity—and uncertainty—about the conquest of Australia and the effects of dispossession on Indigenous Australians, but to see the continuity with today’s conversations and dreams. Anthropologists like Stanner and historians like Day and Clendinnen, novelists like Grenville and Malouf and Astley expose the “crippling incomprehension” which, since the British conquest, has so often characterised European Australians’ response to Indigenous Australians, providing some remedy to being “tongueless and earless toward this other [Aboriginal] world of meaning and significance” (Stanner 44-45).

In abusing “postmodernists” and giving preference to people like Keith Windschuttle, the government seeks to repudiate visions of settlement that recognise some of its “nastier aspects” and its “inevitably ambivalent character” and to deny legitimacy to Indigenous perspectives. In doing so, they seek to restore the conquest as a civilising mission by an inherently superior Western culture. This in turn justifies the refusal to make recompense for dispossession and the renewed push for “assimilation” and “the new paternalism”.

While the PM has declared Australia now purged of the “need to explain itself” and free of “perpetual self-identity seminars”, I would argue that it is one of the functions of literature to challenge such complacency. Australian writing, as well as presenting our own stories and perspectives, inevitably allows us to explore and question our sense of ourselves and our possibilities. As William Faulkner said in accepting the Nobel Prize, “The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man; it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.”

I’m not suggesting that writers or critics should crank out polemic, but that they should not underestimate the power of literature to chip away at orthodox ways of thinking; that they celebrate the power they have to insinuate new images into our repertoire. Works of literature can provoke us to question accepted verities and can show us that there are always alternatives; that descriptions of reality are only tentative and that a final understanding of the way things are isn’t possible—or even desirable. For me, as a reader, what remains intoxicating is that through literature I am provoked into seditious perceptions that erode my certainties and settled doctrines.

Although I agree with David Marr that the arts should not be contorted into a patriotic celebratory purpose, I am concerned that their omission from public debates is to our collective detriment. It may feel better to be ignored than abused, but the curious, fearless voice of social criticism is not something we can do without if we are to transcend our limitations. As Dorothy Green (14) insisted, “Those who value political and personal freedom have the strongest motive to preserve respect for the word” and that “society in any significant sense of the word is simply not possible without literature” because it is “the memory of a society which provides it with its continuity and its enduring personality”. Indeed.

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