

**Jane Gleeson-White. *Australian Classics: 50 Great Writers and their Celebrated Works*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007, 338pp.**

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Jane Gleeson-White's *Australian Classics: 50 Great Writers and their Celebrated Works* is not typical fodder for the review pages of *JASAL*. Consequently, this reviewer's approach to reviewing the book should not be the typical approach. Instead of the usual commentary on the book's content, this review considers what it might mean for a book such as this to be published in the current literary climate. But first, what kind of book is *Australian Classics*?

The short answer is that *Australian Classics* is a kind of reader's guide to Australian literature. It is not an anthology, but rather contains a brief introduction to each of 50 significant literary works by Australian writers, including 29 novels, two short stories, ten poems, six non-fiction books, and three children's books. (Drama is, of course, notably absent from this list, but this reviewer does not want to get bogged down too early in a list of exceptions. After all, while this sort of book necessarily invites questions and comments such as, 'What about so-and-so?' and 'You've forgotten such-and-such a book', formulating these is a valuable and enjoyable part of the reading experience and should not be precluded by any reviewer.) Each of the book's entries—in other words, each introduction to a literary work—typically runs between four and six pages in length and contains information about the author's biography, a summary of the work, and a publication history. It is a testament to Gleeson-White's skills as a writer that these entries do not grow tiresome; her presentation of this information is never formulaic and always coherent.

Gleeson-White writes in her introduction to *Australian Classics* that she had 'a simple intention: to make a book on "Australian literature" as there are books on "Australian art"'. She goes on to write that she 'wanted to create a book that would give a broad overview of Australia's writing and bring some of its key authors to a wide audience'. Gleeson-White is careful to specify, however, that her selection of 50 'key authors' reflects 'both some generally recognised set of "Australian classics" as well as [her] own idiosyncratic literary tastes'. This claim allows Gleeson-White to comfortably remove herself from the fray of scholarly debate about the relative merits of canonisation; she acknowledges a degree of subjectivity in her selection and does not try to position the values

that informed her choices as somehow superior or authoritative. In keeping with this spirit, Gleeson-White ‘invited a number of writers and readers to contribute lists of their own favourite Australian books to *Australian Classics*’. There are 38 such lists included in the book from a wide variety of Australian writers, journalists, academics, and artists, and these act as a kind of counterbalance or corrective to Gleeson-White’s own (much longer) list. They are also one of the most enjoyable features of the book.

While *Australian Classics* may operate at a safe distance from scholarly debates about canonisation, it cannot avoid another contentious issue: the state of Australian literature. Gleeson-White does not explicitly address this issue in her introduction to *Australian Classics*, but readers of *JASAL* would, of course, be aware of an ongoing debate on the subject. Or, at the very least, *JASAL* readers would be aware of recent speculation and concern about the health of Australian literature. *Australian Classics* constitutes an important intervention in this debate, but in order to understand how and why it is important, it is first necessary to outline the contours of this speculation and concern.

It is not often stated, but it is possible to identify two prongs to recent speculation about the state of Australian literature. The first of these prongs looks at the role of Australian publishing in relation to the production of Australian literature. Arguably the most important document in this first prong is Mark Davis’s ‘The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing’, which was published in *Heat* 12 in 2006. Extracts from and versions of this article appeared in various places, most notably David Carter’s and Anne Galligan’s *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*. Davis’s article also inspired a variety of responses, the best among these being Nathan Hollier’s two articles, ‘Diagnosing the Death of Literature’, published in *Wet Ink* 6 in 2007, and ‘Between Denial and Despair: Understanding the Decline of Literary Publishing in Australia’, published later in the same year in *Southern Review* 40.1.

As revealed by the dates ascribed to these publications, only recently have Australian commentators begun to systematically observe the effects of an ‘Australian publishing industry and market [which] is dominated by a handful of large corporations, themselves generally parts of massive, multi-national media conglomerates’ (Hollier, ‘Between’ 66). These effects are generally held to include a reluctance to publish ‘literary’ titles and an increasing desire to publish celebrity and blockbuster authors. In just the last few years, many journal and newspaper articles (the latter, while heretofore unmentioned, *do* exist) have been published that express concerns associated with this first prong—that is, concerns associated with Australian publishing’s contributing

role in a perceived decline in the health of Australian literature. Hollier provides an extensive (though far from comprehensive) catalogue of examples of this concern in 'Between Denial and Despair', as does Davis in an article published in *Overland 190* in 2008, 'Literature, Small Publishers and the Market in Culture'.

Evidence of this concern, however, is not limited only to journal and newspaper articles (and the occasional book chapter). Rather, it is possible to also trace its influence in a series of scholarly research imperatives at the highest level—or, in more concrete terms, research projects funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Recent and ongoing ARC-funded projects include 'Australian Literary Publishing and its Economies, 1965-1995', 'America Publishes Australia: Australian Books and American Publishers, 1890-2005', 'Australian Fiction 1989 to 2005, and its National and Global Infrastructures', 'Reformulating an Australian Cultural Infrastructure: Strategic Intersections Between the Publishing Industry, Libraries and Cultural Policy', and 'The Print Cultures Network: Print Culture and National Culture in a Globalised Economy'. Clearly, these research projects represent an important new direction in Australian scholarship. This direction is indicative of a strong interest in examining the role Australian publishers might play in ensuring the future health of Australian literature, or what this reviewer has dubbed the first prong in recent speculation about the state of Australian literature.

The second prong considers the role of education in fostering an appreciation and, thus, building a market for Australian literature. Like in the first prong, one document exerts extraordinary influence in this second sphere of concern: Rosemary Neill's article 'Lost for Words', which was published in *The Australian* on 2 December 2006. Neill reported that the retirement of Peter Pierce as the inaugural professor of Australian literature at James Cook University would 'leave the number of permanent professorships of Australian literature in this country at . . . one'. It has been elsewhere observed that this article constitutes but one piece of *The Australian's* 'longrunning campaign against "critical literacy" in the teaching of English literature and in support of a return to "reverence" for literature . . . [and] to promote putting Australian literature back on the curriculum' (Davis, 'Literature' 5). However, Neill's 'Lost for Words' elicited a particularly strong response across a variety of sectors. Numerous letters were written to the editor in response to Neill's article, as well as articles published in newspapers, magazines and journals. Numbering among the latter were two articles in the April 2007 issue of *Australian Author* magazine, 'The Strange Death of Australian Literature' by Peter Kirkpatrick and 'Media Neglects its Responsibilities to Oz Lit' by this reviewer.

Even more prominent, however, were two government initiatives that seemed to spring from the type of criticism typified by Neill's article. The first of these was the establishment of a new Chair in Australian Literature, announced during former Prime Minister Howard's final year in that office but implemented under the Rudd Government. The Federal Government agreed to provide \$1.5 million in funding towards this initiative, which was designed to reinvigorate the study of Australian literature at the tertiary level. Bids were accepted for an institutional host for the Chair, and in April 2008 it was announced that The University of Western Australia had been selected for the honour.

It was little surprise when for the second government initiative—the establishment of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards—Pierce, the retired professor of Australian literature at James Cook University, was selected as Chair of the judging panel for the 2008 Award for Fiction. This initiative was designed to recognise the contributions of Australian writers to the Australian cultural identity, as well as raise the profile of Australian writers and writing. In September 2008, tax-free prizes of \$100,000 each were awarded to the winning works of fiction and non-fiction— respectively, Steven Conte's *The Zookeeper's War* and Philip Jones's *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers*.

If one takes these two prongs to recent speculation about the state of Australian literature together—that is, if one considers the roles of both Australian publishing and education in relation to the production of Australian literature—it is possible to arrive at a reasonably accurate picture of recent debate on the subject. So why is *Australian Classics* an important intervention in this debate? Because while this reviewer has had little luck engaging his girlfriend's mother in a dialogue about the aforementioned newspaper and journal articles, literary prizes and academic chairs, there is a very good chance that she will take an interest in Gleeson-White's *Australian Classics*.

*JASAL* readers would not be out of line asking why the estimation of this reviewer's girlfriend's mother matters. It matters because she is, according to all of the latest research on reading habits, the typical Australian reader. That is, while she reads more than the average Australian, she numbers amongst those most relied upon by the literary industry in this country to keep afloat. The demographics fit, at least in terms of the obvious factors like age, gender and discretionary income. Her reading interests are also typical, as is the manner in which she arrives at her choice in books. She does not read the literary pages of any newspaper, for example, though she reads more books than most members of the so-called 'literary elite' known to this reviewer.

*Australian Classics* continues to offer something to members of the latter category, but it is unique in that it contributes to recent speculation about the state of Australian literature from a place that is outside of the two prongs to this speculation outlined above and so potentially interests a new segment of the population. In other words, it constitutes a third prong: pragmatic action directed at a diverse (including 'popular') readership. It is in books like *Australian Classics* that our best hope lies for a healthy, productive Australian literature for many years into the future.

That last sentence sounded a bit like a birthday speech, did it not? Which reminds this reviewer that his girlfriend's mother will be celebrating her birthday next week. Good thing this reviewer already has an appropriate gift in mind.

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