

Susan Lever. *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia*. New York: Cambria Press, 2008, 262pp.

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Susan Lever's monograph on David Foster and his work is remarkable in many ways. Not least, Lever explains the dynamism of satire in exploring social, political and even spiritual life in particular historical periods, and presents a highly persuasive account of the significance of Foster's contribution to Australian literature. The book provides an engaging and penetrating commentary on Foster's extraordinary output in the context of literature in Australia and the United States over the last fifty years. Lever's analysis is entertainingly accessible and navigates a path through the extremes of contemporary literary theory to explain Foster's complex philosophical ideas and stylistic idiosyncrasies. In addition Lever interweaves a portrait of Foster himself that offers many insights into his persona and personality.

David Foster is an enigmatic figure, with a peculiar gift for performance. On several occasions he has shunned the convention of reading from his novels at public events, and instead appeared as his character D'Arcy D'Oliveres in a blue postman's uniform, complete with bush hat, and puffed away on his roll-your-own smokes as he recites. When he was awarded the Miles Franklin Prize for his epic novel *The Glade within the Grove* in 1997 Foster made a rather shocking speech condemning the crass and commercialised world of literary prizes, festivals and the way in which writers from overseas are relentlessly promoted to the detriment of those authors living in Australia.

In fact, as Lever demonstrates, Foster is frequently provocative in his interactions with the public. He once presented a paper at the Australian Defence Force Academy (at which I was present) in which he outlined the connections between the martial and the literary arts, declaring that women should not be admitted to the military or the bush fire brigades of Australia. At a literary festival in Victoria in 2001 Foster appeared with Marcia Langton and Robert Manne on a panel charged with the task of discussing Aboriginal Reconciliation. Foster delivered a paper entitled 'A Plea on Behalf of Eros' in which he proposed that individuals must transcend race in their own hearts, and that 'assimilation through miscegenation, offered hope for the future' (176).

Foster is witty and erudite in all of his meticulously prepared public appearances. I was also present in 1996 at the ASAL conference in Brisbane

when he recited Juvenal in Latin, stunning, irritating and impressing the audience with his virtuoso demonstration of the importance of 'close understanding and knowledge of just one writer as opposed to the "promiscuous" reading of many' (176). When I later asked him why he had chosen to present an oration in Latin he muttered something about his desire to humiliate us. He is the consummate satirist who seeks to disturb, disgust and outrage—a long way from the 'reformer' of the folly and vice school of satire. For Foster there is no moral program and art is 'incomplete and provisional' (33).

Lever presents an incisive and at times very amusing analysis of Foster's fiction, springing from the idea that satire is a performance 'in which the author's satirical persona "inhabits" the text' and that the 'living place of the satirist' must be accepted in reacting to his work. I found the opening two chapters compelling in setting up the scope of Foster's achievement because of Lever's dexterity in positioning Foster's work. She does not shy away from the 'contradictory' and 'infuriating' elements of many of Foster's novels, nor does she overlook his persistent assumption of 'masculine privilege'. But she clearly argues her case for the importance of Foster's fiction and sustains her view that the novels offer grand and visionary accounts of Australia and its relationship with the rest of the world, and are fit to be read alongside the fiction of Patrick White, Xavier Herbert and Joseph Furphy. At the same time Lever acknowledges the critical resistance Foster's work has received for much of his writing life.

At the age of 26 Foster gave up his promising academic career as a research chemist. In spite of a University medal, a PhD and a prestigious fellowship in the United States, Foster could not foresee a career for himself as a scientist. Lever explores the effect of Foster's scientific training on his writing style, evident in his encyclopaedic accounts of history and religious beliefs, detailed descriptions of objects, habits and the natural world, his cataloguing and stylising tendencies, and his anatomical derision of various philosophers.

Lever also demonstrates Foster's own commitment to truth-telling through satire 'no matter how unpleasant or offensive' (26) that truth might be. One of the most pleasing features of Lever's analysis is her account of where Foster stands amongst practitioners of the satirical novel. She convincingly places him beside Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo and William Gaddis. But Lever carefully distinguishes between the postmodernist elements of Foster's fiction that align him with these authors—his playfulness, intrusive narrative voice, blend of high and popular cultural material and mode, mix of register and genre, and what she discovers in spite of all of this, to be his

‘modernist sensibility’. Lever makes the important point that although the differences between modernism and postmodernism are never absolute or prescriptive in the way a writer might practise his or her craft, the terms help delineate what she calls ‘the broad intellectual shifts in late twentieth century writing’ (22).

With that introductory framework in place, Lever presents a nuanced and lively critical response to Foster’s fiction, documenting and analysing the reception to his work as she proceeds. She begins with a discussion of Foster’s early works, and then moves on to his satirical histories, his fictional meditations on the limits of art, and his sweeping philosophical and religious experiments, before moving to a discussion of his essays and occasional writings and later comic novel.

In a chapter entitled ‘Men’s Business’ Lever discusses Foster’s most popular novels, *Testostero* and *Mates of Mars*. The second of these is one of the most provocative and funniest novels of contemporary Australian literature. But it is savagely serious as well. As Lever explains, Foster contemplates the idea that men in the Western world are increasingly feminised (and feminist) and the paradox that the more civilised a society becomes, the weaker it is and the more likely it is to be destroyed by a more aggressive society. The implication is that Australia could easily be victim to a more martial, more militant society such as Indonesia. Foster pursues this theme through various characters who share an enthusiasm for the martial art of Taekwondo. Foster himself is a practitioner of the art, and Lever identifies its role in providing a philosophy and spiritual system that gives structure to the novel, in addition to exploring its allure as a form of ‘secret men’s business’ in Australia.

Lever also reflects on the intellectual debate about white destruction of indigenous peoples—comically dramatised in *Mates of Mars*—in relation to the work of other novelists writing on this topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She distinguishes between Peter Carey, David Malouf and Kate Grenville who tend to dwell on the ‘sins of the past’ and the more radical consideration of Aboriginal Australia in the present afforded by Thea Astley, Victor Kelleher, Sam Watson, Kim Scott and Andrew McGahan, with whom she aligns Foster (123).

In *The Glade within the Grove* Foster again works on the theme of the dangerous feminisation of men in Australia, with a portrayal of two sub-cultures of Australians: the foul-mouthed, jinker driving MacAnaspie men and the impractical hippies of the forests. Lever’s discussion of this visionary novel is inspiring. It is Foster’s most difficult and most rewarding novel,

and Lever admits that it will 'defeat' readers who insist on an 'entertaining narrative' and 'interesting characters'. Her analysis, however, demonstrates that this is Foster's masterwork, a descendant of *Tristram Shandy*. Lever also makes the point that Foster as satirist is not detached from the folly and decadence of Australian society but that he acknowledges his own part in all of the absurd failure around him. In this he follows closely in the footsteps of two Australian master satirists, Christina Stead and Patrick White.

Lever's monograph is a pleasure to read, and moreover her analysis opens up many opportunities for further work on David Foster.

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