

A. Frances Johnson. *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage: Making and Unmaking the Postcolonial Novel*. Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016. 353 pp.

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A Frances Johnson is a poet, novelist, artist and teacher of creative writing. This book is the result of research she undertook as a PhD student at the University of Melbourne, where she is now the Head of Creative Writing in that University's School of Culture and Communication. It took me a little while to apprehend the form of this book, because it was slightly novel to me. It is a study of the Australian 'postcolonial novel'. What is meant by this is that bracket of Australian fiction written between the 1980s and the current moment (1989-2014, in fact) and which deals with the dire consequences that European colonisation had for Indigenous Australia. Johnson's case studies are Kim Scott, Peter Carey, Kate Grenville, Matthew Kneale, Richard Flanagan, Rohan Wilson ... and herself.

It is the presence of this last author in the sequence that changes the modality significantly and Johnson explains this at the outset. As well as being 'a broad study of recent developments in the field of the Australian postcolonial historical novel', the book will also include 'an in-kind study of creative process in relation to the shaping of my own historical novels' (xiii). I am uncertain what 'in-kind' means in this context, but the basic intention became clear, which was to approach the issue of this category of Australian fiction from the practitioner's point-of-view. Viewed in this way, the history wars of the 1990s and 2000s were less a theoretical impasse or a debate about the contours of the national metanarrative, than a technical problem (i.e. to be addressed at the level of technique).

In this way, Johnson's book is very interesting for the way that it introduces a new level of referentiality to literary debates. I felt at times as if I was in an Escher drawing where the object and the subject drew each other at the same time. But that sensation came about from my continuing to unconsciously imagine it were a study of written fiction by a critic, rather than a study of the writing of fiction by a writer. I am grateful to Johnson's book for showing me how these can never be the same thing.

What Johnson's book also made painfully vivid was the genuine difficulty that a writer faces who wants to tackle the contact zone of Australian colonisation. Her book is properly post-postcolonial because it takes as a given the basic critique offered by the post-colonial moment. This is, to boil it down rather severely: *you cannot speak for the other*. But what do you do then if you are a historical novelist? Remain silent and fail to represent the indigenous world at all? Perform reverent gestures of deference? These are ethical problems but these are also, for anyone teaching creative writing like Johnson, actual, real practical problems. What is it that you advise the students in your writing class? Who gets the Distinction and who gets the Credit, and why?

What we have in Johnson's book is thus an assessment of fictive strategies in terms of how successfully, or otherwise, they navigate the reefs of cultural sensitivity that surround Australia's postcolonial situation. So, to take a typical statement from her study, she asserts that the novels of Rohan Wilson 'privilege complex, fallible viewpoints, both black and white, and strive to render complex intercultural encounter without risking collapse into political correctness and extinction porn' (203). Against this she adduces Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008), which does not offer the same complexities and ambiguities. In this respect, and because it is in part a manual, Johnson's book is unapologetically didactic.

Johnson's book is important, then, both as a perceptive study of Australian post-colonial fiction, and, for announcing the emergence of a new kind of literary scholarship which owes its shape and rationale to the rise of creative writing as a university subject. The book's discursive coordinates are those that one sees, often enough, in the exegetical component, or research proposal, of a creative writing MA or PhD. One would be tempted to call the approach taken by Johnson (which draws on fiction as examples of craft or practice) as 'ficto-critical', except that term has already been taken up to mean something else. In some ways then, the kind of book that Johnson has written, for all its grounding in postcolonial theory, harks back to an epoch in criticism (say the 1940s and 50s) which was explicitly evaluative and sought to train the critic and the writer in good taste. Growing up in the wake of this era, I am naturally sceptical about whether this is the job of critics. On the other hand, this is actually the job that most people in the public, to the extent that they turn their minds in this direction, think we are doing. I mean, if we can't say what's good and what isn't, who can? And if we are going to pronounce in these ways, then we should have a method.

Strictly measured as literary criticism, *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage* does not necessarily broach new territory in the study of Australian writing. The readings of works by Grenville, Scott, Flanagan, Wilson are astute and sound, but largely conventional. The debates around these books are fairly well rehearsed by now and Johnson is certainly abreast of these discussions and cogently represents their dynamics. Johnson's theoretical touchstones are also relatively familiar. Terms like 'historiographic metafiction', 'heteroglossia', 'intertextuality', and 'polyphony' all locate the approach in the postmodern turn, with Bakhtin used—probably to his shock, but not ours—as a measure of whether novels were successfully novelistic. The method works, which is why it has been so widely taken up. Bakhtin's heteroglossia does indeed offer a remarkably suggestive literary model for the kind of cultural pluralism that emerged into the social formations of western countries from the 1960s onward.

But as a study of Australian fiction, I think one finds a much more searching—both broader and deeper—study, for instance, in Nicholas Birns' *Contemporary Australian Literature: A world not yet dead* (Sydney University Press, 2015). Yet where Johnson's book comes into its own is in bridging two cultures—that of creative writing as an emergent discipline, and that of Australian literary studies, particularly in the wake of its postcolonial revision. Johnson's book intelligently intervenes into the space opened up by the advent of creative writing in the allied disciplines constellated around literary studies. She shows that theoretical and historical issues are also practical issues of method and writes about these with the calloused fingers of a practicing novelist. What it loses in historicist precision, it makes up for in practical application. For this reason, I think the book serves a market that has not really been served hitherto, which is that of the creative writing instructor and student in Australian tertiary settings.

A brief note tucked into my review copy suggested that the book be reviewed, 'preferably by a creative writing-literary studies scholar as it deals with the practice of creative writing'. Unfortunately it fell to me, but as Lacan liked to say, a letter always arrives at its destination. The book also raises an important further question about where Australian literary studies is taking place and points to the fact that it is often happening in Creative Writing programs or, indeed, in Education faculties, or Library and Information studies. The fact that Australian literature continues to attract serious scholarly consideration, though, is more important than the exact location of this scholarship. In this way, Johnson's book is a welcome addition to our subject.

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