

***Investigating Arthur Upfield: A Centenary Collection of Essays.* Eds Kees de Hoog and Carol Hetherington. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 298pp.
UK GBP: \$39.99, US USD: 59.99
ISBN: 978 1-4438-3452-0 (hbk)**

In his preface, Kees de Hoog lays out succinctly the impetus for this volume: ‘[W]e, the editors, are aware the centenary of Upfield’s birth in 1990 was not marked or celebrated in any way’ (xi). De Hoog and Hetherington aim to redress that remissness in this welcome volume of twenty pieces, chiefly essays, on Arthur Upfield, arranged in sequence of publication. The book opens with Pamela Ruskin’s 1964 epitaph for the author as it appeared in *Walkabout*; the remaining pieces were published between 1974 and 2009. Napoleon Bonaparte, Bony, Upfield’s fictional mixed-race detective, is at the core of the majority of the essays with biographical detail on the author, his interests, and perceived views about his creation also claiming a primary importance. The essays on the writer and his work encompass a wide range of focus—anthropological or sociological, the novels as exemplars of crime fiction, the novels as literary efforts, publishing and reception history. Also included are American mystery writer Tony Hillerman’s homage to Upfield as the inspiration to his own work set in the American Southwest and a story by Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo centering on his detective creation, Watson Holmes Jackamara.

Selections present—or repeat—sketches of Upfield’s life. English by birth, the black sheep of an otherwise prosperous family, Arthur was sent to Australia before the First World War as a last-ditch effort to pull himself together. He served in the Australian Imperial Force for four years of the War and then moved on to an itinerant life in the Outback as swagman, drover, and cook. In his roamings he met Tracker Leon, a man with Aboriginal heritage who had received a better-than-usual education despite the inauspicious beginnings of his life. Upfield had already begun writing a crime novel featuring a white detective, but contact with Leon inspired him to start anew with a transformed detective: a mixed-race man sharing certain of Leon’s biographical facts in embellished form—the orphaned product of an unknown white father found as an infant in the arms of his deceased mother, an orphan who would earn an MA in History from Brisbane University, a detective peerless in his solving of crimes, chiefly in a bush setting.

The first Napoleon Bonaparte mystery, *The Barrakee Mystery*, appeared in 1929; the 29th, *The Lake Frome Monster*, was published posthumously in 1966. Upfield achieved great popular success, living on his earnings (unlike his fellow Australian writers), and earning scorn, if he provoked any reaction, from the Australian literary establishment. Any listing of the seminal fiction writers of the twentieth century will most likely omit Arthur Upfield, even though his works found a large audience—in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany—and served as the basis for radio plays, television productions, and film screenplays.

The details of Upfield’s life pervade the essays; Arthur Upfield becomes a vivid figure through the accretion of detail across the volume. Yet Napoleon Bonaparte, Bony, dominates the collection, the essays offering evidence of changes in social, cultural, and critical views over time as they strive to make sense of the Bony phenomenon. Heather Paish’s ‘Bony and the Colour Question’ establishes a foundation for the study of the character and novels on which other writers will build. Paish asserts that the novels continue to find readers—she is writing in 1974—because they are ‘good detective yarns’ (7); they are also valuable for their insight into white Australian views of Aborigines over time. A recurring vexed issue arising throughout the

essays is Bony's ambivalence about his racial mix, a rational, civilised white versus an emotional, primitive black. Evidence of this ambivalence appears in his sense of superiority to the half-caste, or mixed-blood population; the inferiority that periodically stabs at him in relation to White Australia; the supposed power of the bush over the Indigenous Australians generally and Bony in particular. Bony finds acceptance of a sort among the white world, but that acceptance has limits. (It is, for instance, good that he has a wife, also mixed-race, who remains unseen by the broader community, amid assurances of a stable marriage. He is thus perceived as neither a sexual nor a social threat.) Paish asks, as other critics do, whether Bony's conflicted racial views are *his* or the author's. Although Upfield is known for his liberality on racial matters, Paish doubts the depth of his support: 'In 1938 at least Upfield only half believed his own words about the possibilities of Aboriginal equality' (10).

As Hetherington states in the Introduction, American critics saw popular literature as an appropriate target for analysis long before their Australian peers did. John G. Cawelti, in 'Murder in the Outback: Arthur W. Upfield', sees the detective story as an English staple, claiming that even with a change of locale, detective writers are largely Anglo-American or Northern European. Cawelti values Upfield for his imposing distinctive features onto the detective story formula and identifies Bony as the mediator among three distinct cultures: the national urban coastal culture as represented by the police or other state agencies; the white culture of the Outback, often hostile to external interference; and Aboriginal culture with all of its timeless traditions—Bony bears the physical marks of tribal initiation. Cawelti also, as others do, singles out Upfield's skill at using the Outback as 'setting and subject' (16) in his best work, depicting communities comprising 'semi-civilized aboriginal groups ... [who] live on the margins of settlement' (17) and whites with only a tenuous connection to the land—and the resulting tensions.

In 'Bony: A White-Man's Half-Caste Hero', Basil Sansom adds a humorous note as he examines Bony's method of crime solving. Bony enters a bush community where a murder has occurred and awaits patiently the further foolish acts of the murderer—i.e. another murder or murders. Noting the high body count that can precede the arrest—I found myself thinking of the police duo in the *Lethal Weapon* film series shooting up the town as they hunt their man—Sansom declares: 'I think Bony is a terribly expensive detective' (27). Although he concludes by saying that Upfield 'wrote very horrid immoral books' (27), he speaks for many Australian readers in acknowledging that Upfield presented the world of the bush to him and gave him 'the vocabulary of the Australian outback' (19).

Ray Browne, another American writer, compares Bony with other literary heroes of the frontier: Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Melville's Ahab and Billy Budd. Browne asserts that for all three writers man and nature are clear antagonists, but in Australia particularly man can never triumph over nature. More effective than these comparisons, however, is Browne's direct analysis of Bony. He sees Bony not as a detective seeking to restore the social order but as one who enjoys figuring out puzzles. One of the collection's longer pieces, 'The Frontier Heroism of Arthur W. Upfield', explores the multiple facets of Bony's character: his superhero sort of birth (who *was* his father?), the constant inner struggle provoked by his two racial pulls, the pearls of wisdom he occasionally utters, as in *The Man of Two Tribes*: 'Eighty percent of tribal strife has its origins in white interference' (qtd on 44).

That said, Browne recognises that Upfield's exploration of racial concerns leads generally to one end: he must support—and thus his detective must support—white civilisation.

Other writers place Upfield and his creation alongside other detective writers and other fictional sleuths. Surveying a range of detective writers—Ross McDonald, James McClure, Tony Hillerman—James C. Pierson is most drawn to the detective novel as a source of ethnographic information. He finds Upfield's work appealing for the several competing roles played by Bony: the subordinate in a white world, the well-respected professional, the initiated Aboriginal male who is also a superb natural tracker, the unprecedented holder of an advanced degree (several writers remark that Bony receives his degree decades before the first Aboriginal earned a master's degree). Tamsin Donaldson pits Upfield's first Bony novel against Sally Morgan's groundbreaking *My Place* (1987), her autobiographical account of the recovery of her family history. 'Australian Tales of Mystery and Miscegenation' contrasts the differing nature of secrets and uncovering those secrets as found in the detective work in each text. *The Barrakee Mystery*, Bony's 1929 debut, features a station-owning family, the Thorntons, and includes an adopted son Ralph, now heir to the estate. Bony shrewdly discovers the station secret—Ralph's heritage is not white but Aboriginal—and amid the mayhem that ensues (which includes murder and suicide) —he keeps the truth of Ralph's birth hidden from the larger world. Donaldson's focus on Upfield's narrative line is most valuable for illuminating a stark contrast with recent forays into personal and family history by Aboriginal writers. Discovering as an adolescent that her family is Aboriginal, not Indian, Sally Morgan launches a detective-style search to learn her family history and in doing so opens up a new world of writing in a way, one that 'owes nothing to the conventions of crime fiction' (73). Donaldson's essay is most useful for underscoring the limits that generic fiction by a white writer must bring to a reading of Aboriginal cultural history. Margaret Lewis compares New Zealand mystery writer Ngaio Marsh with Upfield, noting how crime fiction conventions alter in Antipodean contexts. Lewis claims that in Marsh's few novels set in New Zealand, characters interact with the exotic landscape in distinctive ways as Bony et al. do throughout Upfield's *oeuvre*. Lewis' larger point is that detective fiction in the Antipodes is not 'an arid and limiting import' (80) but a 'structure that expands to give significance to unusual settings' (80).

One of the most ambitious essays in the book, Kay Torney's 'Filling "Terra Nullius": Bony in the Deathspace', juxtaposes the European fantasy of the empty land against the reality of the Outback—a site of 'love affairs, murder victims, food, shelter, tribal learning ...' (93). To Torney crime and solving crime in Upfield 'becomes a problem involving both ethnicity and landscape' (93). In the Bony novels (Torney inaccurately claims there are about twenty) the usual social roles are inverted. The Aboriginal figures are at home here; their life is 'rich and full' (94) despite their material wants. It is whites who do not belong, who are physically, psychologically, and spiritually unsuited for rural Australia. Torney insists that crimes in these books involve both white and black, and both races must play a role in solving the crime. Bony is the 'human "Bridge"' (98) between the two cultures. Torney is particularly interested in plots involving a mixture of miscegenation, stolen children, and adoption—and the consequent violent havoc. The novels she explores—*The Barrakee Mystery*, *Bony and the Black Virgin*, *Man of Two Tribes*, *Murder Must Wait*—feature 'a fully initiated Aboriginal who clearly remembers the European invasion' and with that memory recognises the loss of his 'birthright' (99). In his role of detective discovering and uncovering, Bony 'is both a symptom and a decoder of the illness he comes to read' (99), life in the Deathspace, the empty land that is not empty, the world of alienated whites and dispossessed blacks, causing the strains that provoke these crimes.

Murray S. Martin hones in on links between Bony and his creator, granting the author his due for his love of Aboriginal Australians and his grasp of the challenges they confront in a white world.

Martin also joins those who stress the author's limits. Despite Upfield's sympathy for Aboriginal struggles and the occasional unexpected resolution (e.g. Tessa in *The Will of the Tribe* moves to reclaim her Aboriginal self), he must ever write from a European perspective. Bony occasionally makes derogatory remarks about blacks, statements identifying them as the inferior race; he will sometimes refer to 'Abos' in the dismissive manner of his superiors in the police force. Martin joins a chorus of voices when he asks, are such views Upfield's or Bony's? Unlike many of the other critics in the volume, however, Martin gives a direct evaluation of Upfield as author. Rather than write the 'great Australian novel' as he had sought to do (103), Upfield produced a body of good crime fiction, enhanced by his ear for dialog and his ability to depict the 'ordinary bloke' in a realistic setting (103).

Glen Ross' piece, 'Bony as Grotesque: Arthur Upfield's 'Bony' Series 1930-1950', is among the most engaging in the collection. Originally one of the chapters in his doctoral dissertation, Ross' essay places Upfield's novels in a sociocultural context. The first Bony books appeared as social concern about the rising mixed-race population was gaining a vocal platform nationwide. Ross analyses Bony as both character and type. At a time when those of mixed race became identified as a cultural problem, Bony emerged. In the novels he causes social disruption through meeting white Australians on an equal basis. This disruption occurs particularly as he encounters white women, many of whom resist him at first though they gradually (or not so gradually) respond to his gallantry. Ross captures their reaction memorably: 'Almost invariably, white women were simultaneously captivated and repulsed by the presence of the halfcaste [sic] detective' (133). Ross notes as well Bony's sense of time as beyond or outside time as understood by the white world. It *is* in Bony's patience, his willingness to wait, however, that clues and solutions to murders appear.

Nevertheless, Ross sees Bony as more device than full-blown character. Upfield was, after all, a novelist who wanted to sell his product. He did what he needed to do in order to make that happen. As the series continued, Upfield gradually lightened Bony's skin colour. Upfield does attend to Bony's inner struggle, the pull of the two races, but he also needs to present a non-threatening figure to his readers. He accomplishes this in part by making Bony a superhero whose powers allow him to be the exceptional detective who always gets his man. And the interior tension always comes down on the side of the white. Bony's values are white values at the last; his fear of the primitive and its potential for undoing all outweigh his pride in his black heritage.

In 'Pulp Fiction: Popular Culture and Literary Representation', Richard Nile takes up the issue of Upfield as a literary figure, as he playfully evokes the storyline of *An Author Bites the Dust*, in which a tiresome, pretentious promoter of an Australian national literature is bumped off. The real targets in the novel are Vance Palmer and his wife, Nettie, both unrelenting promoters of an Australian literature and inclined to dismiss or shut out those whose focus lay in telling a good story rather than in creating memorable images or effects. Nile counters the longstanding notion, promulgated by the Palmers, that early twentieth-century Australia literarily speaking saw a 'long drought' (146), ending with the publication of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* (1926), a highly praised novel that sold few copies. In fact, Upfield's first novel, *The House of Cain* (1928, not a Bony book), entered a world active in the publishing of fiction throughout the century (According to Niles, '1200 novels were published between *Such is Life* and *Working Bullocks*' [146]). Upfield's novels joined an Australia rich in the publication of popular fiction.

Ada Coe also shows more interest in Upfield's development as a writer than in his creation. Loving his adopted country deeply, Upfield, in Coe's view, is moving away from the colonial perspective of a Kipling or Haggard in his treatment of his detective, who at first is defined by a 'gentlemanly code of honor' (151)—most outdated in Bony's dealings with women—and developing his distinctive style and themes: enthusiasm for the physical Australia and its people. This enthusiasm is infused with nostalgia for a bygone Australia. The 'Nostalgia in Arthur Upfield's Fiction'—Coe's subtitle—is evoked through the bush setting, Bony's evident sympathies for the rural world and its people, and the respect ceded to Aboriginal ritual. In Upfield's *Outback*, time does not link to progress. Coe aligns with Ross in describing how Bony waits, knowing that waiting will lead to the moment in which the criminal reveals him (or her) self.

Marilyn Rye shifts the focus back to the detective in 'Upfield's Napoleon Bonaparte: Post-Colonial Detective Type as Cultural Mediator.' Rye labels Bony a post-colonial detective, a man 'of mixed cultural background ... who would struggle with the reconciliation of two cultures' (159). The post-colonial identifier also links us to the critical idiom of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as Rye here connects Bony's role as outsider to Upfield's outsider status, the immigrant sent to Australia by his family. Not accepted as a white man, Bony cannot fully embrace his other side either. Rye remarks on Bony's pride in his Aboriginal ties at particular moments, but at other points he distances himself from the Aboriginal people, referring to their actions with 'they' and 'them' and aligning himself with the 'we' of the police force (167-8).

This Aboriginal heritage contributes to his professional success, a success denied his white peers and superiors, as he 'does not dismiss the activities of Aborigines as senseless' (164). In the novel *Sinister Stones* Bony finds meaning in smoke signals or markings on stones. Although in key moments he pushes away from the black world, Rye views his ambivalence as logical, as befitting a man raised to accept white culture as better than black. An academic reader might resist applying the term 'post-colonial' to a series of genre novels predating the term or their creator, but Rye asserts that 'Upfield's novels foreshadow the work of later indigenous writers' (175). She champions Upfield for his taking Aboriginal culture seriously in an era in which his peers—I take her to mean within and outside of Australia—ignored Indigenous Australians altogether.

Russell West chiefly focuses on Sally Morgan in 'Uncovering Collective Crimes,' but he employs Upfield as an apt foil for Morgan's work. West lauds Upfield for his 'ventriloquism of the black speaker' (176); additionally, he concedes that the author does show outrage, at least occasionally in the novels, at Aboriginal living conditions. Upfield, however, is a mystery writer most bent on continuing his commercial success. Despite the provocative ingredients, Upfield moves away from confronting racial realities or social ills, seeking instead a tidy, satisfying solution to the crime at hand, one presumably not threatening to white readers. Comparing Sally the detective with Bony, West also sees the potential for having the 'accusatory force' of her message 'flattened and blunted' (192) as the narrator-author, in seeking the truth about her family through her elders' account of mistreatment, also seeks reconciliation with white Australia.

With Winona Howe and her essay, 'Inspecting Women: Arthur Upfield and Napoleon Bonaparte', the collection moves into its strongest pieces. Howe, for instance, debunks the common view that Upfield ignored women generally or that he presented them as stereotypes.

She claims the opposite, that the author created many ‘multifaceted and carefully layered female figures’ (198). She comments that those women having consistent contact with Bony ‘are unable to avoid falling under his spell’, submitting to an emotional or intellectual seduction underneath the proper surface of Bony’s behavior (198). Howe singles out several texts boasting complex female characters, expending particular energy on Tessa of *The Will of the Tribe*. A mixed-race figure, Tessa undergoes a fraught journey resulting in her adhering to the powerful call of her Aboriginal side. The early part of the essay delineates Upfield’s periodic struggles with women throughout his life. These struggles, Howe argues, are shared by Bony, whose lack of understanding of women lends the novels their complexity.

For the sequential reader of this volume, Travis Lindsey’s ‘The Genesis of Bony’ comes as a shock. Writers have repeatedly identified one Tracker Leon as real-life inspiration for Bony. Lindsey lays out the oft-rehearsed facts of Leon’s life—a mixed-race tracker for the Queensland police, the orphaned infant who grew into the brown-skinned, blue-eyed, cicatrised man whom Upfield met in 1924 while boundary riding and with whom he shared at least two extended conversational encounters. Bony shares much of this history, going his model one better at least educationally (an MA rather than a high school certificate) and professionally (a detective, not merely a tracker). Lindsey moves on to other Upfield writings, finding other encounters between the author and a person of mixed race, a ‘halfcaste’, one whom he named Napoleon Bonaparte, another remarkable for his ‘sharp Nordic features and ... blue eyes’ (204). Lindsey also cites a narrative passage in a 1923 novel by Catherine Martin in which an Aboriginal man boasts of ‘being one of the most cunning trackers in Australia’ (208), a statement of Bony-like bravado.

Lindsey’s startling—and convincing—conclusion is that the figures Upfield testifies to meeting, including the oft-cited Tracker Leon, are all fictitious, that Upfield’s original source material for Bony emerged from Martin’s book. Tracker Leon was ‘created to meet the demands of a reading public and the machinery which serves it’ (206). As for the novel source, Nanka, Martin’s tracker, is a full-blood Aboriginal; as a part-Aboriginal, Bony would have a greater freedom of movement yet remain apart from the people and world he investigated. Rather than fault the author for inventing persons and events, Lindsey admires Upfield for the risks taken in creating such a character.

Of the final three essays, Hetherington has authored two of them. The first, ‘In Their Different Ways Classics’, presents by-now familiar information: Upfield’s output, Bony’s appearance, his role as outsider, Upfield’s attention to place, charges that he bought into the Lawson and *Bulletin* myth of the bush. The essay succeeds because she integrates her ideas into a cohesive, succinct whole. By this point a reader who had begun the collection indifferently—or antagonistically—would be likely to concede the value of Upfield’s work and grant him and his detective their place in Australian literary history. Hetherington takes especial issue with those arguing that he sentimentalises the bush, asserting instead that Upfield understood the place was not known to most of his readers and knew as well that the exotic locales stuffed with sensational events and quirky characters would appeal to urban readers within and outside of Australia. An unapologetic fan of the author, Hetherington identifies his singular fame as ‘the most successful ... Australian writer of popular detective fiction in the twentieth century’ (210).

In ‘Re-assessing Arthur W. Upfield’s Napoleon Bonaparte Detective Fiction’, John and Marie Ramsland also traverse familiar territory, but their words, when linked to the whole, underscore points developed throughout the book. They highlight Upfield’s skill in conveying an everyday sense of reality of bush life, in places where everyone knows everyone else’s business, yet

secrets exist and persist, awaiting a Bony to bring them to light. Writing in 2009, Ramsland and Ramsland can trace the rise and fall of his reputation. The rise of Aboriginal activism, which encompassed the publication of a range of work by Aboriginal writers, led to a decline in Upfield's popularity and—for those who might have respected him—a diminished respect. Ramsland and Ramsland, however, see Upfield and his work as milestones of Australian literature. He wrote of the world he knew; his Aboriginal characters and his views about them grew out of his experience and direct observation. In presenting Napoleon Bonaparte to readers Arthur Upfield was the first fiction writer to place an Aboriginal figure at the center of a novel as the hero.

These essays draw readers into the life of a singular writer and his eccentric detective. Devotees of the novels should appreciate the analyses detailing Bony's facets or the passages examining Upfield as producer of a body of good crime fiction and possibly something more. Those who have read little or no Upfield would most likely feel compelled to sample one or more of the novels. Few of the writers in the collection commend Upfield for his achievement as a writer of *literature*, yet a large number assert his skill in portraying a landscape or a mood or a telling exchange between characters. In the final piece, Carol Hetherington takes her earlier commendation further: Arthur Upfield was the first Australian author to gain an international reputation; he had 'an exclusively and distinctively Australian product which was marketed and sold worldwide' (247). I contend that de Hoog and Hetherington have achieved their aim; they have redressed the neglect in a volume likely to spark new or renewed interest in Arthur W. Upfield. That his influence is far-reaching is averred by Tony Hillerman, who gives author and character this nod: 'When my own Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police unravels a mystery ... he is walking in the tracks Bony made fifty years ago' (29).

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