

Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, eds. *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*.  
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As the editors of *Tim Winton: Critical Essays* rightly note, literary criticism of Tim Winton's work has been sparse to date. This observation is supported elsewhere (Rooney, 2009, 159) and by this writer who was at a loss in recent times when seeking critical works that might enrich a feminist reading of *Breath* (2008). The long overdue volume of critical works in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays* is therefore a most welcome contribution both to Winton studies and to literary criticism. Critical essays in this volume draw from a wide range of standpoints, critiques and reflections, bringing together a remarkably comprehensive analysis of Tim Winton's writing. Some contributors note the poetics and aesthetics of Winton's work; others engage critically with the absences, the contradictions, and the social and historical contexts that form a basis for many of Winton's narratives. The diversity of critical standpoints expressed in this compilation provides a valuable contribution to the themes raised in Winton's work. But this is not just a thematic approach to Winton. Some essays offer close textual readings that open up possibilities for a richly nuanced, socio-cultural understanding of the works. Contributions in this volume exemplify how Winton's works are received and mediated by readers in critical, creative, political and pleasurable ways; some essays bring to bear all of these factors. Analyses are presented through the lens of race, nation, gender, neoliberalism, through the symbolic, psycho-social and metaphysical aspects of Winton's writing. The strength of this collection of essays, although marked by the divergent analyses of contributors, can also be noted in the way these often contrary standpoints are combined to produce a coherent and critically engaged understanding of Winton's literary explorations of the locale in Western Australia, its people, and the day-to-day exigencies of their lives.

The introduction to this compilation notes the value of literary criticism *per se* as a mode of inquiry for making meaning and contributing to cultural debates. As McCredden and O'Reilly rightly claim, 'most literary critics do not set out simply to be "critical" in the reductive sense of that word'; rather they are 'readers seeking to explore, question and debate texts, authors and contexts publicly' (1). What follows is a collection of critical work whose diversity of analytic approaches 'explore, question and debate' Winton's work in ways that complement the variety of his oeuvre itself. Some essays are perhaps more convincing than others, but all thirteen offer readings of Winton's fiction that demonstrate a close engagement with the narratives under scrutiny, with the politics that inform much of Winton's works and also, with the literary theorists whose work is deployed for analysis.

The volume begins with Bill Ashcroft's essay, 'Water,' which draws on Ernst Bloch's concept of *Heimat* (18), the sense of home/belonging, to provide a basis for understanding the theme of water in Winton's works. *Heimat* in this schema becomes the promise water provides, the possibility for freedom: alive but formless, fluid but timeless. Water is, like Winton's characters, always becoming, flowing without location, anticipating hope and predicting utopia, a 'medium of freedom' (26) 'where death is ever present' (37). Ashcroft's reading of Winton, through the lens of *Heimat*, teases out some of the symbolic links Winton makes between rebirth, redemption and death. This essay draws us towards the power of water in Winton's novels as a vigorous force and as a calm restorative, as a promise of joy, escape and freedom. Here, the stage is set for work that follows to explore the particularity of Winton's texts in what can be read as a vibrant conversation among the contributors.

While all the essays offer an original contribution, some stand out in their ability to extract from Winton's work a profound sense of the possibilities for potential meanings inscribed in the narratives. Brigid Rooney's persuasive and deftly argued piece, 'From the sublime to the uncanny in Tim Winton's *Breath*,' offers a reading of *Breath* that traces the movement from the sublime to the uncanny through the characters' various struggles with identity, loss of self and autonomy, and loneliness. Rooney's application of the philosophical sublime as an 'elite masculine subject formation' (248) re-imagines the narrative's celebration of risk and mastery of the ocean, reading the sublime against its ordinariness to reveal the paradox of breath as 'monotonous'—as in its necessary unbrokenness in didgeridoo playing. Rooney's analysis of *Breath* draws attention to the use of binary opposites in Winton's writings while noting the ambivalence associated with unresolved polarities.

Fiona Morrison's contribution to the volume, "'Bursting with voice and doubleness": vernacular presence and visions of inclusiveness in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*,' examines Winton's use of vernacular through a range of narrating strategies. Drawing from Derrida, Morrison situates Winton's depiction of presence in *Cloudstreet* (1991) as a metaphysics of transcendence—wholeness—a 'desire for inclusive unity' (51). Identifying a 'speech community' in the work, Morrison draws on Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' to argue for the novel's desire for cultural nationalism.

Contrasting with that of Morrison, Michael Griffiths's essay: 'Winton's spectralities or what haunts *Cloudstreet*,' asks what haunts or troubles this text. Griffiths raises the 'spectre' in *Cloudstreet* as a haunting of the production of the Australian nation. Griffiths's reading of *Cloudstreet* historicises the narrative within the framework of colonial violence, the dispossession and appropriation of land—not as bequeathment—but as a violent act of theft whose spectral presence haunts the house in *Cloudstreet* as a site of 'inherited property,' and simultaneously its nation of readers as 'inheritors' of a nation. Griffiths's attention to the absences in *Cloudstreet* provides a deft historical nuancing of this text which reads Indigenous absence as a textual—and *real*—historical loss that haunts both the work and its readers. Both Morrison's and Griffiths's approach to the analysis of *Cloudstreet* draw from entirely different Derridean frameworks, to produce very different, but equally unique and interesting readings of this work.

Bridget Grogan's essay, 'The cycle of love and loss: melancholic masculinity in *The Turning*,' offers an analysis of Winton's short stories in this text through psychoanalytic accounts of grief and melancholia. Grogan argues that narratives in *The Turning* (2005) are characterised by loss, whose transformative potential lies in ongoing self-reconstruction. In contrast, Nathanael O'Reilly's essay 'From father to son: fatherhood and father-son relationships in *Scission*' focuses also on Winton's short stories through a quite different examination of the genre. O'Reilly argues that Winton re-evaluates dominant masculinities in his works and re-imagines 'new ways of being for both fathers and sons' (178).

Nicholas Birns offers a critically engaged reading of *Breath* in his essay 'A not completely pointless beauty: *Breath*, exceptionality and neoliberalism.' Birns draws attention to the novel's focus on risk as an allegorical reference to the provincial echoes of global neoliberalism articulated through the narrative's reference to surfing and financial risk-taking. He notes the play between the local and global, or provincial and sophisticated, as these are expressed in *Breath* through spatial shifts that disturb stereotypical notions of provinciality and sophistication. Drawing attention to Winton's focus on working-class culture, this essay situates Winton as an 'outsider' (273) whose work does not rely on

narratives of unionised or other working-class solidarities but whose works deal with the post-union politics of neoliberal ideology and can therefore be read according to the more contemporised framework of neoliberal politics.

The volume ends with Lyn McCredden's fine essay, "Intolerable significance": Tim Winton's *Eyrie*. McCredden reads Winton's latest novel, *Eyrie* (2013), through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of 'intolerable significance' as a way of making sense of Winton's characterisation of the dejection and loss of self that is experienced by the text's central character. McCredden describes the similarities in this novel between Winton and his protagonist, as a 'haunting' between author and character, which, she argues, pervades Winton's fiction (308). This insightful reading of *Eyrie* offers a unique perspective on the novel through the application of Kristeva's concept of abjection and will no doubt inspire other creative readings of *Eyrie*.

Contributions examine variously love, death, gender and childhood, and the transnational dissemination and reception of Winton's work, while others consider how hegemony, neoliberalism and transculture can be used as theoretical bases for understanding Winton's fiction. Each essay is a testament to the polysemy of Winton's work and to the multivalency of its reception.

To reiterate, literary criticism of Winton has been meagre to date, and given that textual analysis undoubtedly plays a role in influencing literary standards and tastes, we have to wonder why, in view of Winton's popularity as a writer, so little has been written. There's no doubt that writing which becomes popular is at times underrated and in some cases marginalised for reasons not always relevant to the writer's literary prowess, interests or ambition, until such time as 'canonicity' is bestowed upon the work: to borrow from McCredden and O'Reilly, 'let the debates begin'(1). Winton's popular status is grounded in his engagement with pop culture, with the vernacular, the seascape, with community, neighbourhood, the regional, and with working class sensibilities, all of which might situate him (for some readers) in the domain of the 'folksy' (as if indeed, the folksy can only be understood as unsophisticated or sentimental and has nothing of value to offer). The fact remains that Winton's fiction is popular in the commercial sense, but his success, and particularly in relation to the literary status of *Cloudstreet*, means that he cannot, (indeed should not) continue to be ignored by literary critics. Winton's presence in high school and undergraduate syllabuses makes his absence in academic literary criticism even more noteworthy. McCredden and O'Reilly assert that while 'we do not always "agree" with his [Winton's] political or aesthetic effects, we hail his courageous literary exploration of human, Australian, contemporary limitations and aspirations' (14). I would add that the essays presented in this volume, many of which do not 'agree' with—and may indeed take issue with—various representations in Winton's work, are in fact a fine contribution to literary criticism, and by extension, a fine tribute to Winton's capacity to elicit this level of response. This volume appropriately incorporates acclaim and critique. *Tim Winton: Critical Essays* may be tardy in its arrival, but it is a welcome addition to literary criticism which clearly expresses a broad range of interactions with the narratives, characters, representations and misrepresentations, absences and presences, symbols, metaphors and rich textual nuances which comprise Winton's literary *oeuvre*.

Colleen McGloin, University of Wollongong

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