

**Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman. *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007*. Melbourne: Melbourne U P, 2009, xii, 292 pp.**

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Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman's *After the Celebration* provides a survey-style account of contemporary Australian fiction, or *Australian Fiction 1989-2007* as the subtitle goes. It is a welcome companion to *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-1988* (1989), their previous book, the chapters of which were written individually by the co-authors, as is the case with this sequel.

It is always a thrill to read and review a long-awaited book, especially a study undertaken by two eminent scholars, one of whom has lately taken centre-stage in the Australian public literary debate. Democratic in intent, *After the Celebration* surveys the full gamut from 'rural apocalypse fiction' to the terrorist novel, including some genres that are largely neglected by Australian scholars such as crime fiction, SF, romance, and chick lit. Whereas some scholars of literary fiction may believe there are too many neglected Australian writers for a study such as this to be sidetracked by, say, chick lit, Gelder and Salzman apparently believe that 'commercial' fiction is as worthy of attention as its more literary counterpart.

And therein lies the first dilemma when attempting to write a conspectus of Australian fiction. Even though these two Melbourne-based scholars can afford the luxury of writing 248 pages to cover almost two decades of fiction (the book includes novels and short stories, although the latter are addressed in only five pages), they still risk being criticized for omitting certain authors and titles. Exhaustiveness in this kind of venture may be the ideal but it is self-evidently beyond reach. So I am not going to quibble over why they have mentioned Antoni Jach's *The Layers in the City* and *Napoleon's Double* while omitting his gem, *The Weekly Card Game* (1994). Just as I was puzzled to find that Christopher Koch's *Out of Ireland* (1999) and *The Memory Room* (2007), David Ireland's *The Chosen* (1997), Nicholas Jose's *The Custodians* (1997) and Philip Salom's *Toccata and Rain* (2004), to name a few, did not even merit a passing mention. And this is how tricky it gets: all nit-picking aside, is it possible to reflect Australian fiction aptly by dismissing such quality works while giving prominence to potboilers?

A second dilemma a conspectus writer faces is the creation of categories, because we all know how much critics like to indulge in 'indexomania'. Pigeonholing books might appear to be simplistic in the eyes of creative writers, but it does come in handy for readers who enjoy sorting books according to their affinities with a dominant genre. And while most categories in *After the Celebration* are perfectly valid, I would question at least two. Firstly the category 'Literary fiction', which is consigned to Chapter 3, creates a deceptive binary whereby everything else which has been omitted from this chapter must belong with its opposite: non-literary fiction. Or should we take this remainder as being second-rate fiction? And so, the nominees in the 'literary fiction' category are: Tim Winton, David Malouf, Peter Carey, Brian Castro, Robert Dessaix, Fiona Capp, Delia Falconer, Gail Jones, Alex Miller, Charlotte Wood, Frank Moorhouse, Shirley Hazzard, Christos Tsiolkas, Venero Armanno, Gillian Mears, Michelle de Kretser, Nicholas Jose, Steven Carroll, Rod Jones, Brenda Walker, Geraldine Brooks, Kate Grenville, Gerald Murnane, Antoni Jach, J. M. Coetzee, Peter Goldsworthy, Jessica Anderson, Penelope Rowe, Kathleen Stewart, Catherine Ford, Kate Jennings, Malcolm Knox, and Elliot Perlman, all of whose works are discussed at length.

Please give a big round of applause for those who have made the big league. Fortunately, Paul Salzman who might have felt uneasy while handling this category, tactfully specifies in the concluding lines of this otherwise undiplomatic chapter that:

‘Literary fiction’ is in some respects more an exploratory descriptor than a fixed generic label: covering modernist, postmodernist and realist novels (whether ‘hysterical’ or moral), works that are formally experimental as well as those that are formally conventional. (141)

After reading the chapter, however, I was still unable to identify in what ways Armano’s novels were more ‘literary’ than say those of David Foster, who has been slotted in the first chapter on ‘Belonging’; or Janette Turner Hospital’s whose work is variously discussed as ‘Rural apocalypse fiction’ (21-2) and genre fiction (172-3). More specifically, Turner Hospital’s *Due Preparations for the Plague* is included under the second dubious category of ‘Australian blockbuster novels’, along with other popular titles such as John Birmingham’s *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand* and Matthew Reilly’s *Ice Station*. Here Gelder cogently defines ‘thriller-blockbusters’ as ‘large, action-and dialogue-driven novels with clearly defined heroes and villains and some technological hardware, usually built around overheated global crises: war, or more often these days, terrorism’ (172). Assumingly, this definition aims at covering the thriller element of this inventive tag rather than the blockbuster aspect. For how could we apply this definition to *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand*? It sounds as if ‘blockbuster’ in this case refers to popular fiction benefiting both from wide appeal and great commercial success. In other words, this is what publishers call a ‘bestseller’. Now I wonder how relevant sales figures are when it comes to creating a new genre fiction category, especially when form and content are simply overlooked. If sales are a crucial component of the category, then Carey’s and Winton’s books will definitely be worthy of being described as ‘blockbusters’.

In an attempt to create a hierarchy of sorts, an endeavour that will certainly make Peter Craven as happy as a rabbit in clover, Gelder asks rhetorically:

Is popular/ genre fiction really so different to literary fiction? The short answer to this question would have to be yes, without question—which explains why we have devoted a separate chapter to literary fiction in this book. (177)

Gelder then quotes Brian Castro, a defiantly literary novelist who is notoriously known for having a selective readership, who ‘argues that literary “works of quality” are routinely obscured by our obsession with “bestsellers”’ (177). Castro’s quote includes an uncharitable indictment of airport bookshops, which—according to the now Adelaide-based Professor of Creative Writing—display and sell ‘Accessories to boredom’. When travelling in Australia recently I found myself browsing through the few stacks of books available in airport bookshops. There, I came across an eclectic mix of potboilers of all genres piled up along with what Castro might consider ‘works of quality’. To be sure, you won’t find Castro’s latest novel, but you will find the latest work by Carey, Winton, Malouf, Turner Hospital, and the occasional media hit such as a recent Miles Franklin winner. It is perfectly understandable that airport bookshops, with their skyrocketing rents, are concerned with stocking popular and fast-selling product, and bad luck for the excluded writers whose books will be sold through other retailers. Gelder rounds off this section with a wishful plea: ‘I hope that readers who have made their way to the end of this chapter are, at the very least, less inclined to write contemporary Australian genre fiction off so condescendingly’ (178). But this disturbing

‘blockbuster’ category segregates and discriminates against writers who are able to make a living from their literary skills from those who can’t. By doing so, it condescendingly (but perhaps unwittingly) dismisses commercially successful authors on the grounds that the more they sell, the more they appeal to the masses, and so the less likely it becomes that their work will be perceived as ‘intellectual’ or ‘highbrow’.

The third snag the writer of a survey book might hit is boring his/her readers. Gelder and Salzman, however, have skilfully entertained their readership with a lively account of Australian literary life sprinkled with feud-related stories and opinionated statements on the very notion of literature. Speaking of literary debates, I did not find Salzman’s section on women’s grunge fiction in ‘Is There a Woman’s Chapter?’ at all convincing, all the more as he discusses works by male writers such as Andrew McGahan. As I have written recently, ‘grunge fiction mainly deals with dissatisfied sub/urbanites who endeavour to fill the vacuity and spleen of their existence with music, drugs, sexual delight, and intoxication’ (Vernay 145). Unlike Salzman, I don’t see the Rabelaisian bodily functions of ‘leaking, farting, shitting, vomiting’ (205) as a defining trait of grunge fiction, a genre pioneered by Helen Garner’s *Monkey Grip* (1977). And yes, I would definitely include Linda Jaivin’s *Eat Me* (1995) as being inspired by the grunge trend and pushing its boundaries. Salzman, however, has included *Eat Me* in the ‘Female Erotic Novel’ category—and why not after all, if no fine line is drawn between pornography and eroticism. He argues that ‘far from being transgressive, nearly all the sex they fantasise about is unrelentingly heterosexual and clichéd’ (207). It sounds as if Salzman has skim-read a lot of *Eat Me*, which Jaivin has described in an understated manner as ‘comic erotica’ (29). *Eat Me* reads like the archetypal plotline of a blue movie, namely a string of fantasies climaxing in an orgiastic sexual frenzy. Needless to say, *Eat Me* is unashamedly democratic in its spanning of a variety of sexual activities, ranging from the erotic to the exotic. The opening chapter involves deviationist practices like stuffing, sadomasochism and exhibitionism, while the following chapters contain additional perversions such as allusions to fisting, voyeurism, transvestism, group sex, not to mention felching in the penultimate chapter.

The final chapter of *After the Celebration* is entitled ‘Literary politics’, and this chapter *had* to be written by the left-leaning and regular *Overland* contributor Gelder. It is also a sheer delight, given that Gelder has spiced up the pages with his age-old antagonism with Peter Craven (234-9). Susan Lever has aptly summarised the Gelder/ Craven debate in these terms: ‘Peter thinks the future of Australian writing is being undermined by the lack of evaluative criticism of it coming from the universities; Ken defends the university academics as embracing a wider range of writing with a more open response than evaluation’ (64). Gelder provides in *After the Celebration* the bedrock for his strongly voiced opposition to the ubiquitous Craven:

This is how literary canons are sustained, perhaps in Australia more than elsewhere: by the aura of association and sheer weight of numbers, and by a literary reviewer who can seem to be everywhere in print almost all of the time.  
(236)

And this is perhaps what literature is all about: clashing viewpoints on particular works as readers respond to the narrative with their personal feelings and experiences which may find a distant, if not sharp, echo in the act of reading. After all, a book is like the best of French patisseries: a multi-layered *millefeuille* whose every layer (of interpretation, in the case of

fiction) counts. Lest it gets messy, you cannot make a clear cut into it. Come to think of it, the proof of the *millefeuille* is in the eating and I feel the same is true of *After the Celebration*.

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