

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION



CONFERENCE PAPER

Old Dog, Hard Road: Reviewing, Criticising, Editing, Judging, Anthologising Australian Literature

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Presented in Session 7: The Creative Critic

Sunday 25 October 2009

The title of this talk is 'Old Dog, Hard Road: Reviewing, Criticising, Editing, Judging, Anthologising Australian Literature'. I will get to those participial bits shortly, but a word about the main title. This is a reference to yet another drover's wife story—not Lawson's, nor Moorhouse's, nor Bail's, nor Russell Drysdale's painting, but the sardonic vignette in which a drover is asked by his mate which route he is going to take with his stock. The laconic, sentimental and unseemly answer is 'thought I'd take the wife. She stuck by me through the drought'. Any old dog on a hard road pursuing the work of creative criticism of literature in Australia is grateful for the loyalty and support not only of spouses, but of many people and institutions. May I salute them first.

Much of my research for *The Country of Lost Children* (1999) was carried out in two great libraries: the State Library of Victoria and here, at the National Library of Australia. Those of us who have worked at them know how indebted we are to their estimable staff and to their grand collections. They are true national treasures, too little heralded. The critic and author will also be involved with other kinds of institutions on a commercial basis, with publishers and the literary editors of newspapers and magazines. He or she will always have horror stories to

tell—publishers whose idea of encouragement is to promise ‘a royalty holiday’, literary editors—and there was a vogue for this a few years back—who suggested that if you couldn’t be nice about a book, better not to review it.

Courage seems to have made a comeback, as instanced in the decision by Peter Rose, editor of the *Australian Book Review*, to run Peter Craven’s response to *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* a few months ago. In my view, Craven rightly pointed out that the reprinting of all the previous year’s anthology of Aboriginal literature skewed the balance of the later anthology and included much avowedly non-literary material. Nonetheless, the whips of political correctness cracked around his ears.

There are a few good rules for dealing with publishers and literary editors. In respect of the former, the main rule is: give in. If publishers tell you that books with green covers don’t sell, give in. If you demur about having a palm tree (rather than a rubber tree), the Harbour Bridge and a dove of peace on the cover of a book called *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam* (1990), forget it. You will lose. If you expect to make your fortune, abandon that fantasy too. Recently I received payment from Texas A & M University Press for a book done a few years ago. With the rising Australian dollar and bank fees, the cheque for \$15.59 will probably end in a frame rather than my pocket. Wins are few. My ‘compendium of the Australian turf’, *From Go to Whoa*, introduced me to provisional tax. Remember the ‘royalty holiday’? That was for the hardback edition of a nineteenth-century poetry anthology. But the book only appeared as a paperback. The university lawyer sided with the editors and we graciously accepted the cheque, while my old mate Peter Ryan had a rare reverse.

With literary editors, the primary rule is to cultivate them. Write to length. Write to entertain. Write to deadline. Canvass for books that you know are forthcoming. Remind them of the (very many) areas that you can cover. Here is another piece of advice. When the literary editor who never answers the phone starts calling, or the one who always answers stops doing so, they are not long for their jobs.

There are rules for the creative critic too. Reliability is foremost. But there are others. Let Dr Johnson speak to us from *The Rambler*: ‘There is indeed some tenderness due to living writers ... Yet I am far from thinking this tenderness universally necessary; for he that writes may be considered a kind of general challenger, whom everyone has a right to attack; since he quits the common rank of life, steps forward beyond the lists, and offers his merit to the public’s judgment. To commence author is to claim praise, and no man can justly aspire to honour, but at the hazard of disgrace’. This kind of eloquent asperity is pertinent for authors and critics, but some tempering is necessary. It is a critic’s signal pleasure to find new talent. Thereafter it is a responsibility to nurture that talent

when novelists, for instance, face those hardest hurdles—their second book, and their third.

A seasoned critic will aspire to a wider view, after he or she has gained the experience to do so. Thus an established author should be scrutinised not just for their latest book, but for its place in the whole career. Thomas Keneally is now nearly fifty years into this game, yet his fecundity is undiminished. 2009 has seen two large, accomplished, very different books from him: *Australians: Origins to Eureka*, first volume in a projected trilogy, and still another historical novel, set in Brisbane at the cusp of the Great War and in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. This was *The People's Train*, which—like many predecessors—presents idealistic individuals at moments of historical catastrophe. Yet there was something new. For the first time Keneally took readers to Gallipoli. Previously it had been the war of his childhood, the Second World War, that most exercised his imagination.

The critic as 'old dog' will snarl at the vacuous concept of the 'literary novel', knowing—with the cases of Peter Corris, Gabrielle Lord, Peter Temple and others in mind—that its supposed antithesis, 'popular fiction', has long been the vehicle of some of the most incisive anatomies of Australian society. I think of another novel which I came upon last year, read and reviewed—David Francis's *Stray Dog Winter*. Set mainly in Russia in 1984 in the year of three premiers, it was both a thriller of a high order and also a brilliant glimpse of suburban, domestic darkness in Australia.

The need not to feel hobbled or obliged by generic categories, to take the book (and I am thinking especially of the novel, whether in verse or prose) as it comes, was brought home to me over the last two years in which I have been Chair of the Judging Panel of the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction. Having to read all the fiction submitted in a calendar year (and then having to wait for the best part of another year for the result to be announced) was a different experience from reviewing books selected for you by literary editors. There was the surprise of finding much impressive work in areas where I don't usually read—Young Adult Fiction and Fantasy—and of seeing what an intriguing glimpse of contemporary Australia can be inferred from this fiction.

This year, for instance, nearly 30% of the books were set overseas. Last year, four of the seven short-listed novels were set in significant part during the Second World War. One of them was the winner, a first novel that I had not read by an author whom I did not then know: *The Zookeeper's War* by Stephen Conte. The judgment was unanimous, and the winner was announced in time for his publisher to reprint for Christmas. Another 15 000 copies were sold on top of the respectable 3000 that had moved in the first place.

In the first PM's Award—2008 for books published in 2007—the fiction judges were asked what they would define as 'literary excellence'? Leaving the quintessence to alchemists, I suggested the pragmatic solution. All those books that made the shortlist would necessarily be excellent. Sometimes the circular argument is the way to go around. What books did we have to judge in the last two years? Some I had reviewed. Some, in 2008, were from authors in the fifth decade of their careers: Keneally and David Malouf. One, this year, was from a Year Eleven student, Alexandra Ardonetto's *The Lampo Circus*. Some books had already won prizes. There were short story collections and—in 2008—exercising the judges' charter that allowed us to call in books that publishers had not submitted, we asked for Dorothy Porter's *El Dorado*, a verse novel that made the short list, not long before she died.

This year the judges made a new determination. Given the quality and evenness of so many of the entries, we recommended that besides the seven short-listed books (by Murray Bail, Geraldine Brooks, Richard Flanagan, Peter Goldsworthy, Sofie Laguna, for her first adult novel, the chilling *One Foot Wrong*, Nam Le and Joan London), there be an extra five that should be highly commended. They were Gary Bryson, *Turtle*, Sarah Hay, *Texas*, Alex Jones, *Morris in Iceland*, Julia Leigh, *Disquiet* and Louis Nowra, *Ice*. In this rich array, there is no sign of ill health in Australian fiction. It was the judges' privilege to encounter all these works and then to pick one from among them. Wait for the announcement on 2 November.

Earlier this month, another essay of Australian literature was published. The work of 24 authors, this was *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, which I edited. I was invited to do so in March 2006, but it was not until the end of that year before the chapter outline had been completed, and refereed, and the authors chosen. Then the Syndics of Cambridge University Press did what they do, and syndicated the book. Considering that several big fish wriggled off their hooks, that other contributors withdrew with serious illnesses, to get the job done in effectively two and a half years was a tribute to those who stayed the course. The only instruction to them—taking the depth and originality of their scholarship for granted—was to be bold.

Collectively, they created a literary history that is also a complex social history of Australia—of movements and institutions, magazines and manifestoes, writers living abroad and in various styles of internal exile, by turns solitary and sociable, labouring, quarrelling, dreaming. The authors of *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* are aware that their book has become part of the history of literary histories in this country. That is, they might hope for an active life for it of a decade or so. Its predecessors include *The Literature of Australia*, educated for Penguin by Geoffrey Dutton. In its first (1964) edition and subsequent revised

edition (1976), the book met such a pent-up demand for a popular and authoritative interpretation of Australian literature (especially among teachers and students) that it sold 60 000 copies. Two decades later, *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988) edited by Laurie Hergenhan, sold a respectable 6000 copies. Both were cheaply priced paperbacks. *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, by contrast, was originally priced at \$250 and was destined almost exclusively for library sales. Now, a snip at \$140, it seeks out the well-heeled general reader.

This history takes its place in a series of national literary histories that are published by CUP. Appropriately, one signal feature of the book is its account of the enmeshment of Australian writers in a world literary economy of publishing, promotion, influence. On the other hand, another emphasis is on the regionalism of Australian writing, which has become more pronounced as the anxious linking of literature and national identity, the confusion of literary and political chronologies (the metaphor of 'coming of age') have become unimportant, redundant. Such anxieties are discernible in earlier literary histories. No doubt fresh ones will be detectable in this latest and largest multivocal literary history of Australia. Still, the job of editing it, for all that it was a hard and long road, was one of the great pleasures of my career.

The Flight of the Mind: Writing and the Creative Imagination was a major National Library of Australia conference supported by the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL)'s Cultural Fund, the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust and Alison Sanchez.

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