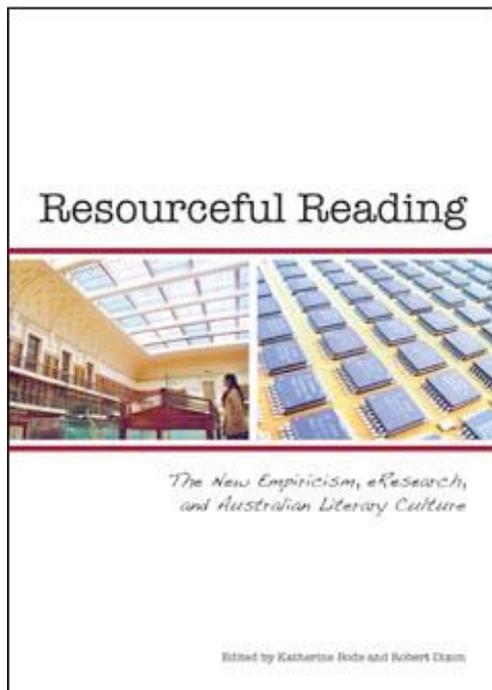


Resourceful Reading: The new empiricism, eResearch and Australian literary culture edited by Katherine Bode and Robert Dixon. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009, pp. x + 368, AUD \$40.00 Paperback, ISBN: 9781920899455.



Haunting the corridors of English departments across the western world is the unsettling question of ‘what comes after theory?’ In the wake of successive waves of literary theorising that energised and transformed the discipline from the 1970s – semiotics, postmodernism, feminism, Marxism, new historicism – a palpable sense of enervation has crept in. The ideological paradigm of identity politics and subaltern critique appears now incontrovertibly to have played itself out. In part, this sense of exhaustion and dissipation stems from an increasingly glaring dichotomy: on one hand a priestly academic coterie discusses textual arcana in evermore hieratic and exclusionary vocabulary, while, on the other hand, a flourishing realm of popular literary interest manifests in reading groups, book prize culture and literary festival attendance. These were audiences to which – and *about* which – the literary academy appeared to have next to nothing to

say.

A welcome reminder that this dispiriting situation is not the only literary game in town came to me while listening to Paul Eggert’s recent paper at the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing conference in Brisbane, in which he used bibliographical and book history data to demonstrate that the rise of the Australian bush myth so criticised by feminist theorists of the 1980s was in fact less the product of the fabled 1890s than of anthologists of the 1940s and 1950s. Refreshingly, Eggert’s fascinating paper demonstrated how empiricism and theory need not function as alternatives but can productively inform each other in the best scholarly research.

Eggert’s scholarly *modus operandi* is part of a larger movement in Australian literary studies loosely dubbed ‘the new empiricism’, which revives and intersects with local and international trends around bibliography, book history and print culture studies. Katherine Bode and Robert Dixon’s edited anthology *Resourceful Reading* (to which Eggert is a contributor) emerges from a multi-institutional Australian Research Council grant and the 2008 University of Sydney conference held under its aegis. The book is divided into three sections: theoretical overviews; individual case studies; and a variety of reports from specific cultural database projects (AustLit, AusStage, APRIL, AusRED). David Carter’s opening essay best establishes the terrain, and the promise of the new empiricism, attempting to find a productive middle-ground between literary studies’ dominant practice of abstruse analysis of textual aesthetics and the micro-oriented empiricism of much bibliography: an appealing intermediate scholarly zone he dubs ‘cultural history’. Carter’s key point is the irreducible intermeshing of ‘literary’ qualities with economic, historical, material and institutional developments such that all literary studies is, inevitably, sociological to a greater or lesser degree. Concern with textual effects doesn’t disappear from literary studies’ radar (as a humanities discipline, how could it?). But these aesthetic questions are anchored in a wider sphere of ‘real world’ concerns which themselves invite theoretically informed analysis and

reflection, rather than being simply assumed as inevitable givens. New empiricist scholars thus practise, in Carter's words, 'not in a world of texts but in a world of books and print and ordinary readers'. (31)

The case-studies that follow vary in the methods of empirical investigation they adopt, ranging from bibliographical-style analysis of publication and translation data, to research in publisher and author archives, to content analysis of newspapers' book coverage. Not all manage to dispel the stale air of quantitative self-satisfaction and methodology for its own sake that has seen old-style bibliography abandoned in droves by graduate students in literary studies departments. However, stand-out contributions include Robert Dixon's investigation of the circulation of Oz Lit in the international 'translation zone', Mark Davis's revelation of the surprisingly serendipitous publication and critical consecration of Henry Reynolds's landmark *The Other Side of the Frontier*, and Katherine Bode's counterintuitive discovery that Australian publishers comprised the dominant producers of Australian novels from the mid twentieth century – that is if the definition of 'fiction' is expanded from 'Literature' to include genre fiction, especially crime and romance.

It is at this point that the anthology hints at – but never really addresses – the extent to which empirical approaches threaten to undermine the institutionally entrenched category of 'OzLit'. If 'Australian' literature can be seen as fundamentally the product of transnational flows, as contributions from Dixon and Roger Osborne suggest, to what extent is the discipline's nationally-prescribed context still valid? So too is the second half of the 'OzLit' formulation challenged. For if, following Bode, we broaden our analysis of Australian-published print output to include genre fiction, can the sanctified status of 'literary' fiction over other categories of writing be legitimately maintained? At the level of disciplinary self-definition, can the OzLit paradigm's elevation of Literature as having a superior role in constructions of national identity and cultural consciousness still be maintained in the face of cultural studies' competing claim for popular culture as the more authentic measure of cultural identity? These questions represent limit-case analyses for an empirically-oriented literary critique. The editors and contributors of this important volume are to be congratulated for injecting methodological dynamism and theoretical optimism into local literary studies, even if they shelter too much under the inherited institutional status of 'Australian literature' to drive their conclusions to their logical endpoint.

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