

KATE LIVETT

Tanya Dalziell and Paul Genoni, eds, *Telling Stories: Australian Life  
and Literature 1935-2012*

Monash University Press, 2013, 639 pp pb

ISBN 9781921867460, RRP \$49.95

It is a rare collection of scholarly essays that fascinates and compels you to keep reading purely for enjoyment. Sure, great literary or cultural theory/philosophy can be beautifully-written, gripping in its profundity and its insights, but it can often be exhausting and sheer hard work as well. *Telling Stories* is profound in the way its accumulated essays give a very contemporary panoramic yet a simultaneously detailed view of twentieth-century Australia. It is also full of genuinely new insights into Australian culture and its products. Despite these serious achievements, however, it never exhausts the reader. An inspired combination of truly knowledgeable contributors and the brevity of each essay – approximately seven pages each – means that *Telling Stories* whizzes along, zipping through nearly a full century of Australian literature (very much in the generic sense of ‘literature’ rather than the high-art sense) and historical moments in chronological order, and before the reader realises it is drawing to a close with 2012.

Chronological order, which I usually look forward to as much as to a dentist’s appointment, is actually fun here, and is central to the success of *Telling Stories*. In a collection as large as this (600 pages not including appendix) it’s crucial that chaos is avoided. Thanks to the chronological order, the reader always feels grounded by the year-by-year date, and every essay seemed to me to benefit from the structural parameters created by the chronology and the obvious brief of ‘What happened in this year in Australia?’ or ‘Why was your chosen text representative of a key moment in Australian history/culture?’

In answering these questions, each contributor brings their extensive knowledge to bear, offering up a particular text or occasionally an incident, as somehow representative of a given year in Australian life. With eighty-six essays covering seventy-seven years of Australia’s

past, there is a lot of wonderful information in this peer-reviewed collection, as well as a lot of intelligent analysis.

Christopher Lee's 'Literary Possibilities of Flight: Bill Taylor's Pacific Flight' is the first essay, and considers the role of the hero-aviator of the post-world-war-one and Australia's relationship to flight. Paul Genoni, a co-editor of the book, is the author of the closing piece, 'Grey Skies over Melbourne: Grand Final Week 2012', a cultural-studies style essay far from the tone common to the discipline of history that characterizes Lee's opener to the collection.

Some of the usual suspects from the 'canon' of Australian literature and culture are here: Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells' (1939) the Jindyworobaks (1937), Florence James and Dymphna Cusack's social realist war novel *Come in Spinner* (1942), *Puberty Blues*, the trial of Lindy Chamberlain, Randolph Stow, Christopher Koch (1965), for example, as well as quite recent texts and events that are imminent inclusions in the canon, such as Nam Le's *the Boat* (2008), Keating's Redfern Speech (1992) and Rudd's Apology to Indigenous Australians (2008). However, in all of these cases a completely new 'angle' or element for analysis chosen by each essay's author results in totally fresh conclusions, and the reader's experience of the way contemporary frameworks can utterly change how we understand literature and culture.

Surprisingly, the majority of essays are on pleurably unexpected topics, from Nettie and Vince Palmer's daughter Aileen Palmer's pacifist political activities and poetry (1939) by Sylvia Martin, Harold Wells' 1950 mining novel *The Earth Cries Out*, by Stephen Knight, Norma Hemming – one of Australia's great forgotten Sci-Fi writers – and why she had to write romance fiction (1958), by Toby Burrows. And then there's discussion of pulp romance fiction set at Uluru (1980) by Toni Johnson-Woods, David McCooey on the complexities of Mary Lord's biography of Hal Porter (1993), and Andrew Fuhrmann's essay 'Your acting's like the end of the world:..', on the Melbourne production of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, directed by Michael Kantor (2009).

Contemporary transnational theoretical frameworks underpin some important work in *Telling Stories*, with Graham Seal's considerations of American Tex Morton's influence on Australian music (1936), the influence of American film on Australian film in two essays, by Julieanne Lamond and Tanya Dalziell (1940 and 1949), Nicholas Jose on literary and cultural exchanges between China and Australia post-Tianneman square (1989), and Brigitta Olubas' discussion of Shirley Hazzard's personal and novelistic relationship to Australia (2003).

There are some wonderful first-person and memoir essays here: Ian Saunders considers both Robert Dessaix's and his own memories of belonging to Australian radio's Argonauts' club (1941). Kim Scott shares his recollections of borrowing Ethel Hassell's *My Dusky Friends* from the library and his thoughts on its position in the history of writing about Indigenous Australians (1975).

There is the wryly humorous here, such as 'One book, two books; one city, many cities: Brisbane reads together', by Susan K. Martin (2002), and Soldiers' mascot 'Horrie the Wog Dog' and his post-war fame (1945), by Paul Genoni. And there's the downright hilarious, such as Anne Twomey's essay on Les Murray and John Howard's collaboration to write a preamble for the Constitution (1999).

I learnt a huge amount about Australia from reading *Telling Stories*. This collection is a testimony to the wealth of Australian literary and cultural productions, and these essays are truly gripping.