

Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours

Jean-François Vernay

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Without doubt, *Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours* is a unique contribution among quite a few existing surveys of Australian literature.¹ As it was published the same year as *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, a landmark collection of Australian writing across all genres from over two centuries, and *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, the most comprehensive volume ever written on Australia's literary history, French scholar Jean-François Vernay's book could have passed unnoticed. Yet, it stands out in many ways.

Panorama's first distinctive feature is its linguistic medium: the study is the first of its kind to be written in French. Furthermore, unlike the aforementioned university publications, which compile the work of several contributors who together sought to give a comprehensive view of Australian literature in bulky volumes meant to be reference works, *Panorama* is a short and single-authored book that reads from cover to cover like a riveting novel. In fact, it would seem that Vernay intended—and managed—to share his enthusiasm for Australia's national literature as much as he sought to impart the sound knowledge he acquired over ten years of research. Passion shows through each page of this carefully argued text.

Another distinctive feature of the book is that it focuses on the novel, although reference is occasionally made to other literary genres. Opting for a chronological (rather than thematic) organisation, the author breaks up the evolution of the Australian novel into six different stages and artfully demonstrates its great metamorphosis over the years: from the colonial to the contemporary period, from the first documentary writings to the modern inclination for graphic illustration, from early convict novels to the written expressions of colonialism, feminism, nationalism, modernism, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and more. In fact, one of the book's main strengths lies in Vernay's ability to associate literary productions with broader movements and relevant historical, political, cultural, social and psychological information. The author thus distances himself from the tendency to approach literature as if it had developed in an ivory tower. Whether as a part, a mirror, a criticism or a way out of society, literature is intimately related to the context in which it emerges. This the author

¹ This original French version has now been translated into English by Marie Ramsland (University of Newcastle) and published under the title *The Great Australian Novel: A Panorama*. Melbourne: Brolga, 2010.

constantly argues, although he never allows background material to interrupt the flow of his narrative.

The value of Vernay's contextual study is at least threefold. First, it provides the basis for an original analysis, that is, an introduction to Australian literature that keeps away from the typical catalogue of résumés and biographies. The author does dwell on a remarkable author, a major work, a controversial affair or a literary prize here and there, in well-defined inserts, indulging in "close-ups" to satisfy the reader's curiosity. Also, he does provide the reader with useful tools (two chronologies, a bibliography and an index) which permit direct access to key information. Yet the point remains: Vernay's essay is no simple collection of literary facts. The second and third reasons for the value of Vernay's approach to literature are intimately linked, both relating to the bridge the author has constructed between literature and the world. On the one hand, readers primarily interested in literature will be presented with not only novels but also the contexts in which these were written and published. This also means that those who wish to find out more about a specific period or literary movement can use the book to identify corresponding Australian references. On the other hand, readers with a general interest in Australia will have a chance to acquire solid knowledge of Australian novels while (re)discovering the country through its writers' eyes.

No doubt, *Panorama du roman australien* will appeal to people with different needs or expectations, which makes its potential readership quite broad. For that matter, benefiting from some of the criticism which met his first book, *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch*, Vernay manages to address both a readership of experts and a wider audience without ever falling into the traps of either obscure writing or patronizing explanations. Instead, the book succeeds in being both scholarly in its research and almost nonchalant in its style. Essential information blends with an abundance of spicy details and pleasant anecdotes and, on the whole, thorough knowledge combines with a delightful command of language. The author's stylistic performance makes it tempting to just say of the book that it is extremely well-written from beginning to end. Yet, for some reason, the prologue is the exception. In stark contrast with the rest of the book, the reasoning here is quite loose and the text is burdened with repetitions, unnecessary 'etc.', simple juxtapositions of ideas, careless transitions, hasty conclusions and a couple of discrepancies. The reader might thus just want to skip the introduction, all the more so as the points it makes are all treated elsewhere in the book in much more satisfying ways.

For all that, the very first sentence needs to be dwelt on. "What could be defined as Australian literature?" the author aptly asks, before arguing rather unconvincingly that any writer or literary work may be considered Australian provided that they somehow relate to Australian 'things' or particular circumstances. Nationality, birthplace, adoptive country, language, feeling of belonging and cultural references are usually not as easily discarded in the definition of a national literature, but there being no consensus on their degree of importance, the author

may indeed have opted for a definition that keeps the framework of his study quite broad. At any rate, consistency is a non-negotiable requirement. Incoherence between definition and illustration will therefore be puzzling, but more disturbing perhaps are some of Vernay's statements. Considering his declared position on literature and identity, for instance, can he reasonably state that Colin Johnson is not an Aboriginal novelist? Admittedly Johnson has no Aboriginal ancestry, but yet, this major political and literary activist is undoubtedly strongly related to Aboriginal "things" and circumstances.

Here and there, such statements on identity may bother readers, particularly those who are strongly committed to post-colonialism. Whereas Tasmanian people of mixed-descent struggle to have their Aboriginal identity recognized, Vernay's mention of an "eradication" of Tasmanian Aborigines is at least contentious. Later, the author relates the controversy surrounding Marlo Morgan inaccurately: she deceived her readers by selling her book as a work of non-fiction, not by pretending to be Aboriginal herself. Elsewhere, the author claims that Aboriginal people are marginalized on two counts as they live in the margins of a society which is itself secluded from the European 'centre.' It may well be that they are marginalized on two counts, but surely, Europe is less of a reference to them than is their own, traditional culture.

Such inaccuracies are unfortunate indeed. On the whole however, they are few, minor, and forgivable in a book that should be held and remembered as a good synoptic presentation of the Australian novel. As the prestigious publishing house Hermann saw it, the world's appreciation of Australian literature is likely to benefit from Vernay's *Panorama du roman australien*—particularly now that it has been translated into English.

Works cited

- Jose, Nicholas (ed). *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009.
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