

An afterword

It's two years almost to the day since I began writing about Australian writers and their books. I don't think I asked myself, when I began, where and how I'd end. The earliest essays were easy because the books fell open at places I'd read many times before. For the most part I was putting down the thoughts I'd been having for years. This changed as the series developed. It occurred to me on a number of occasions that the book in hand was not as I'd remembered it; indeed I frequently wondered how I'd misread it so badly when I'd read it years before. This tells us that books change as readers change, and tells us also that a book can have as many interpretations as it has readers. And yet, as we all know, a consensus does form, and certain works get to be seen in certain ways. There's no preventing this, and it's a means by which a book becomes publicly owned, part of a country's life, and memory. The books I've written about in my thirty eight essays have all attained that status, in my opinion.

This is not the same thing as creating a canon of great works, a process I distrust because certain people, opinionated critics, mostly, are usually too influential in the creating of such canons. Ordinary readers come to feel they must obey what's been said by supposedly better minds. This flouts my idea of how a good reading of a book is achieved. I don't like canons of literature and I do like good reading.

Which leads me to a point I have a need to make, about my choice of writers and books as the subjects of these essays. Readers will notice that a number of well known names are missing, and that the missing include many fine writers who are active today, or have been until recently. I can hear people challenging me, 'How could you write about our literature and leave out X, Y & Z?' I should answer this. I think the simplest thing I can say is that I decided, early on, to respect my own limitations. Like any other reader, I've had books open in front of me which have forced me to admit to myself that I wasn't doing justice to what seemed to be a good idea, or that I could see that a writer was doing his/her business with skill but I simply wasn't able to react to the writing in the way that it required. I am a writer myself, I've read reviews of my work that blamed me for what was really the shameful ignorance or wilful blindness of the reviewer, and this has made me seethe with displeasure. As a writer, I feel I must be true to other writers, and that includes keeping away from their work unless I can enthuse about it in the way I would like if the work was mine. It's a necessary courtesy to stay away from another writer's work unless I can do it justice, and it's a fact of life that we all have limitations and can't do justice to everybody's work, just as we can't understand every other writer's work in the way that was intended.

Hence my silences. If you think I should have written about X, Y & Z, write about them yourself! I say this seriously. Most books

disappear too quickly. They come out with publicity (if they're lucky), they're reviewed on arrival, then for the most part they disappear. It's assumed that if they're not made into films then they've died. They haven't, they've moved into the underworld of secondhand books, they're no longer earning the authors a cent in royalties, and their longer, underground existence, which may be quite an influential one, is also one that keeps them out of sight. The secondhand book is like a wonderful old fruit tree, shady, harmonious, well-loved by those who know it, but well out of sight of those who are walking past the front of the house. My thirty eight essays have been more of a stroll through the lanes, with some peeping over old fences, than a drive through the main thoroughfares, but I have enjoyed my journey and I hope my exploration of books I've loved will persuade others to do the same for other books. There are always writers out there hoping their books will be read, valued, understood ... and wanted.

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