

# A Defence of Tempered Praise and Tempered Criticism in Book Reviewing

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THE ACADEMIC, CRITIC AND NUN VERONICA BRADY ONCE WROTE THAT THOMAS Keneally 'has always been a writer who mattered, even when he is writing too much too quickly' (74). For several reasons, I often ponder this brilliant line. First, it captures a fundamental truth—perhaps *the* fundamental truth—about Keneally's oeuvre. Indeed, it is an even more accurate appraisal of Keneally's legacy in 2016, taking into consideration his more than fifty published books, than it was when it appeared in the literary magazine *Meanjin* in 1979. Second, the brevity of Brady's observation is admirable: she uses so few words to say so much so well. Third, Brady here offers a mixed critical response: she is at once positive and negative about Keneally, with the two responses commingling rather than competing; her tone is moderate.

In this essay, I offer a defence of tempered praise and tempered criticism in book reviewing—or at least, a tempered defence of such responses. Although I review both fiction and non-fiction, here I contain my comments to fiction and use Australian examples. Looking back on over a decade of reviewing fiction (I published my first review of fiction in 2006), I find that, for me, a measured sort of positivity has frequently been my chosen response to individual works of fiction.

This positivity is almost never absolute or unstinting; instead, it usually sits amongst measured criticism. I am unsurprised to find various degrees of positivity so well represented in my collected criticism, because my foundational philosophy as a critic—a conscious, considered and long-held starting point—is that it is an achievement to write an average novel or short story. In my view, a ‘reasonably good’ but flawed novel or collection of stories warrants a ‘reasonably positive’ review. I believe this starting point—it is personal, not something I seek to push upon other critics—is consistent with the responsibility of the critic to produce a rigorous and honest critique of a book. It also allows, in my view, a critic to judge a book against a standard of perceived excellence: while it is an achievement to write an ‘reasonably good’ book, that achievement is not the attainment of excellence.

Although this essay will make a case for tempered praise and tempered criticism, I agree with Gideon Haigh, whose brief 2010 provocation about what he calls the ‘demise’ of book reviewing in Australia, worries about timid reviewing practices, as well as ‘sheer dullness and inexpertise’ (9, 10). But I see no automatic correlation between, on the one hand, timidity, and on the other hand, a polite, respectful and measured tone. Amongst a mostly intemperate list of complaints about the supposed poor state of book reviewing in Australia, John Dale quotes US writer John Updike’s rules to himself as critic, which include this key point: ‘Try to understand the failure’ (Dale; Updike xvi-xvii). This is, I believe, one key role of the critic: with the right to criticise comes an obligation to do so responsibly.

Haigh and Dale both offer examples of what Kerryn Goldsworthy has aptly described as the ‘decline polemic’ (Goldsworthy). The debate can be summarised thus: book reviewers in Australia are incompetent *and* book reviewers in Australia are bootlickers and cowards *and* book reviewers in Australia are bullies. As Angela Bennie suggests, ‘What is most evident about these prevailing perceptions, these rumblings, is that they point to a profound mistrust of the motives and the abilities of the critic in our culture’ (10). Bennie published her book in 2006, but the debate remains familiar. I find James Bradley’s 2013 comment convincing:

the ‘debate’ about reviewing is really just a stalking horse for a much bigger set of anxieties about what Australian writing is for, and about the democratisation of culture more generally ... Those anxieties seem to frame so much of the handwringing about reviewing and standards. (Goldsworthy)

Still, if critics currently endure a mixed or poor reputation, or if their relevance is increasingly in question in the digital, democratising moment, this situation is

worth pondering. In mounting an argument in defence of tempered criticism, I unavoidably abut one prominent and well-worn element of this debate about the state of criticism. It is this: is there too much softness and/or chumminess in Australian criticism, or, alternatively, is there too much snark? I find this ‘soft versus snark’ dichotomy as inadequate as the ‘three cheers versus black armband’ dichotomy of the inelegantly named history wars. Both dichotomies set artificial boundaries that then dictate the parameters of how a discussion might unfold and how ‘a war’ might be ‘won’.

But if I accepted the usefulness of ‘soft versus snark’ dichotomy as a constructive way of appraising the reviewing landscape—I do not, but for a moment I will fake it—my reviews would fall towards the ‘soft’ end. When James Ley, quoted by Goldsworthy, refers to ‘chronic soft-peddalling’, he may well have in mind the sorts of reviews I write. When critic of critics Ben Etherington refers to the ‘compliment sandwich’, ‘four or so paragraphs of positive commentary, then a passing criticism, quickly rescued by affirmation’ (Etherington), he might well be describing one of my reviews, with its mix of modulated positive and negative commentary. In distancing myself here from the ‘soft versus stark’ dichotomy, I hope not to adopt a defensive frame of mind—but if I appear defensive, so be it. Certainly, this essay is subjective. As the English writer and critic Tim Parks puts it, ‘to be impartial about narrative would be to come from nowhere, to be no one’ (50). Reading a novel can never be an objective act, and neither can writing a review of a novel. A review is itself a personal piece of writing, one that emerges not only from a reviewer’s judgment of a book but also from the reviewer’s experiences, beliefs and reading history.

In what follows, I reflect on my personal set of beliefs about criticism, about reading, about the importance of purpose of fiction. I do so, at least to an extent, through the techniques and spirit of exegetical scholarship. In the creative arts, exegetical scholarship acts as an appraisal of an artist’s own processes, sometimes (though not always) in the form of a response to, or an explanation of, practice-led research (Dawson 194-5). As Nigel Krauth notes, the term ‘exegetical’, in the context of the creative arts, remains faithful to its original sense of there being a canonical or biblical text ‘that the exegesis supports: i.e., a *canonical* text that *needs* explanations’ (emphases in original; see also Kroll). However, there is an obvious difference between explaining, say, Genesis, and explaining your own primary text (Kroll). In turn, exegetical scholarship recognises the personal element of creativity but also of research itself. The creative arts exegesis was initially necessary to help legitimise the creative arts within the academy, but I suggest its utility has now broadened. Exegetical self-reflection helps show and explore some of the possibilities—the necessity, the inevitability—of acknowledging and invoking the personal element that exists in *all* scholarly research.

Nonetheless, the personal approach I adopt comes with caveats, including a recognition that western culture currently has a disproportionate focus on the personal. Apart from the increase in exegetical writing emerging from the academy, writers are increasingly required to discuss themselves. As Krauth puts it, 'Every time a writer is asked to provide a paper, give an informal talk, or contribute an article to a journal in the current Australian or international contexts *and in so doing talk about their own work*, they are asked to perform an exegetical function' (emphasis in original).

A contemporary focus on the self extends into the broader culture. While writing favourably about US critic Daniel Mendelsohn, Ley reflects on the 'current obsession with the realities of the self', which, Ley says, 'has created a situation in which the public sphere is swamped with the opinions, idle thoughts, revelations, commentaries, review and diaristic ramblings of anyone and everyone' (Ley, 'Age of Idiots'). Extending exegetical principles and an exegetical spirit to the context of book reviewing, as I do here, might well sound like self-absorbed navel gazing—because the only thing worse than a critic banging on about, say, why Jonathan Franzen is a fraud, is a critic banging on about what it is like to be a critic banging on about why Franzen is a fraud. More problematically, exegetical commentary can slip too easily into self-justification. In this context, Haigh raises a point about the interconnectedness of the publishing and writing industry: 'After all, the author might be reviewing us one day, or perhaps already has. In which case, it may, of course, be payback time' (10). Later in this essay, I comment on Stella Clarke's scathing 2009 review of my novel, *Figurehead*. As a critic of fiction who is also a writer of fiction, I do not believe I equivocate to avoid the future unequivocal criticism of others—but I cannot prove it. Similarly, does my earlier point, that it is an achievement to write an average novel or story, reflect a certain sort of sensitivity? I believe not, but it is hardly my call.

Mark Davis addresses the broader cultural problem bluntly in his influential book, *Ganglands: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*: 'the loudest noises are the barely audible squeaks of barrows being pushed and the quiet hiss of urine entering pockets' (139). I am, I think, a reasonably typical example of the sticky issue Davis identifies. I am not solely a critic operating in a small national industry, but also a writer (in other words, someone whose fiction has been reviewed and will, hopefully, be reviewed again in the future, and someone seeking to find or keep a publisher), editor, board member of a magazine, board member of a state-based writers' organisation, academic (including teacher of student writers), judge of literary prizes, peer assessor for publicly funded writing grants, and so on.

Goldsworthy, citing several of the critics she surveyed, notes that ‘allegations of cronyism and insularity have in turn been questioned, disputed, and discounted on a number of fronts, most commonly the idea that this sort of thing is peculiar to Australia’. While I agree that this issue is not a purely Australian phenomenon (Bennie 11-7), I take seriously this local version of insularity. Critics, like various other people in the industry, sit forever on the cusp of crossing a line of conflict of interest. In this essay, I have already cited a writer I have shared festival stages with, writers whose books I have reviewed or who have reviewed me, a writer who I have commissioned to write an essay, a writer whose non-fiction book I shortlisted for a book prize, and so on. I take seriously Davis’ point that ‘everything in the culture wars is connected’ (Davis, ‘At War’), even when his gaze is aimed at neoliberalism and its vast floodwaters. But I do not find the adoption of a self-consciously aggressive or negative approach, to ‘prove’ independence, an especially sophisticated solution.

Whatever the limitations and possible pitfalls of exegetical scholarship, the issues about book reviewing I canvass here have no legitimate response, in my view, other than the personal. Any individual interpretation of the role of the critic comes with personal baggage attached, whether or not a contributor wishes to acknowledge this. Peter Rose, the long-time editor of *Australian Book Review*,<sup>1</sup> has argued that ‘criticism—such an influential genre—is one of the least self-critical and transparent literary forms’ (30; see also Goldsworthy). This discussion circles a fundamental if enduring question, which is also personal: what is the role of the critic? This question has a centuries-long history, but that history is not my focus particular here.<sup>2</sup> Goldsworthy notes a range of views about ‘what a review ought ideally to be or do’. Susan Wyndham, literary editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, suggests that a reviewer’s ‘ultimate responsibility is to the wider culture’, Rose suggests it is to the book itself, and former chief critic of *The Australian* newspaper (and now publisher at Picador) Geordie Williamson splits it 50/50 between the book and readers, ‘who are trusting you to arbitrate honestly’ (Goldsworthy; see also Rose 34).

My principal responsibility, as I see it, is to the book and to the way the book begins to find its place within the culture. Whether I love, loath or have mixed feelings about a book, I aim to talk back to it and, by extension, its author. I do not see this ‘talking back’ as an inferior act of writing or thinking, nor as an act of subservience. As such, I am mildly horrified by US novelist John Irving’s suggestion that ‘Reviews are only important when no one knows who you are. In a perfect world, all writers would be well-enough known to not need reviewers’

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<sup>1</sup> Disclosure: I serve on the board of *Australian Book Review*.

<sup>2</sup> For one recent Australian-tinged foray into this longer history, see Ley, *The Critic in the Modern World* (2014).

(Hansen). In my view, it is the critic's job, or one of them, to generate and drive debate, while remembering that the book itself, rather than the critic's response to the book, anchors and founds the discussion. In an arc that spans excellent to awful, it is vital that a critic explains why they have reached their conclusions.

The question of tone is critical to my defence of tempered positivity and negativity in book reviewing. But the question of tone has a wider relevance, as Bradley points out:

For what it is worth, I think the problem is part of a deeper issue with Australian culture across the board, which is that we are almost incapable of distinguishing criticism and debate from personal attack. It's a problem that cuts both ways. Not only are we lousy at criticising something or somebody without attacking them personally, we're almost incapable of interpreting criticism without treating it as a personal attack. (Menzies-Pike)

The 'soft versus snark' dichotomy reflects, in my view, a broader problem in Australia regarding the way we go about publicly arguing/disagreeing with each other, not only about books and writing but about a range of artistic, cultural, political, historical and social matters, in which there seems to be no meaningful space between, on the one hand, blind deference, and, on the other hand, hectoring.

While I have faith—a word carefully chosen—in the speculative potency of fiction, and in fiction's capacity to reshape and re-energise vital issues, I nevertheless strive to keep the tone of my contribution to the debate constructive. As John Updike puts it, soon after offering his rules for criticism, 'The communion between reviewer and his public is based upon the presumption of certain possible joys of reading, and all our discriminations should curve towards that end' (xvii; also see Dale). I endorse Updike's comment, even as I argue that fiction, including Updike's fiction, has a much more complex purpose than causing simple happiness. Being challenged or confounded by fiction is part of its joy, as is finding and honing entirely new ideas prompted by reading and interpreting. Alberto Manguel puts it like this: 'I believe there is an ethic of reading, a responsibility in how we read, a commitment that is both political and private in the act of turning the pages and following the lines. And I believe that sometimes, beyond the author's intentions and beyond the reader's hopes, a book can make us better and wiser' (x). Even as I recoil somewhat from Manguel's earnest tone, I agree.

The novelist and critic Tim Parks links subjectivity in interpreting and judging books with the role and status of critics:

It's now a commonplace that there is no 'correct' reading of any book: we all find something different in a novel. Yet little is said of particular readers and particular readings, and critics continue to offer interpretations they hope will be authoritative, even definitive. In this regard, I've been thinking how useful it might be if all of us 'professionals' were to put on record—some dedicated website, perhaps—a brief account of how we came to hold the views we do on books, or at least how we think we came to hold them. If each of us stated where we were coming from, perhaps some light could be thrown on our disagreements. (Parks)

Parks isolates a tension—a positive tension, I believe. There is not—there cannot be—a single definitive reading of a book. No critic can force me to interpret Helen Garner or Helen Demidenko/Darville or E.L James in a particular way. But Parks goes on to suggest that professional critics continue to aim for 'authoritative, even definitive' interpretations. This juxtaposition resonates for me: although I acknowledge—indeed, embrace—the subjectivity of my reading, I nevertheless aim for the authoritative. In acknowledging the subjectivity of my interpretation of a book, I logically reject a definitive view. And yet, Parks is right: I *aim* for the definitive even while understanding, explicitly as well as implicitly, that I am reaching for *my* definitive rather than a universal definitive.

As Ley has written, 'to criticise something is inevitably to assume a position of intellectual mastery' (*The Critic* 2). I agree: as a book critic, I judge books against standards of excellence, or at least 'excellence' as I define it. The fact that I do so on my own terms does not alter the elitism I embrace (if anything, a personal elitism is the most arrogant elitism of all). As I noted at the beginning of this essay, I see the writing of an average novel as an achievement—but 'achievement', here, does not equal 'excellence'.

Haigh argues that book criticism should have 'the courage of its elitism' (11). While I agree, to defend elitism can mean any number of things. It does not, for example, presuppose a particular view about the importance of the western canon. The canon wars—or the 'canon brawl', as Lee Morrissey niftily put it (Hayes 225)—remain unwon, and unwinnable. A critic's relationship to the canon is personal. As already noted, I agree with Parks that critics aim for the authoritative, which is one reason why I have an ingrained suspicion of the canon. I do not cede my judgment to an official list of 'great books', not only because so many of those books are written by dead white blokes but because a critic's elitism is an individualistic act.

All that said, my wider response to the canon (and the canon wars) is not purely that of critic but is complicated by other roles I hold. I am also, for example, an academic in an English department, teaching students, contributing to curriculum development, and contemplating the capacity of some participants in the canon wars to ‘allow questions about how to achieve equal recognition in a democratic society to spill into questions about what constitutes literary value’ (Hayes 228). I am also a writer of fiction, and my approach to reading, especially in my youth and early adulthood, finds common ground with Saul Bellow: ‘My tastes and habits were those of a writer. I preferred to read poetry on my own without the benefit of lectures on the caesura’ (14). A detailed examination of the writer-critic and the ‘pure’ critic is beyond this essay’s scope, but all critics possess a distinct set of biases and preoccupations.

As the Australian literary (and arts) community is currently aware, what is—and what is not—‘excellent’ is politically charged and contestable. Does a Nespresso machine make excellent coffee? Are Golden Retrievers excellent dogs? Is George Brandis an excellent politician? Or Mitch Fifield? Am I an excellent critic? In all cases, it depends on how you define ‘excellent’. For me, excellence means that a book succeeds superbly and consistently on its own terms. As Updike advises, ‘Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt’ (Updike xvi-xvii; Dale). Bennie refers to M.H. Abrams, who contrasts an ‘impressionistic’ approach and a ‘judicial’ approach to criticism (Bennie 19-20; Abrams 51). I find such delineated approaches partially useful but ultimately unsatisfactory. And as Bennie notes, ‘implicit in both models is the idea that the work of art is an autonomous object the sits ... independent of its cultural context’ (21).

I do not use a checklist to pass judgment on a novel. Rather, I weigh a shifting combination of multiple factors. For me, an ‘excellent’ work of fiction leaves a record of its presence, like a brand, like a scar. As already noted, most books I read are not ‘excellent’. But that does not mean they are necessarily absolute failures, open to ridicule and to a contemptuous, aggressive, superior tone. Here, the discussion drifts back towards the ‘soft versus snark’ dichotomy I have attempted—unsuccessfully—to avoid. As Goldsworthy does, I distinguish ‘certain sorts of negative or even just searching criticism’ from ‘the sort of hatchet job that seems to have been written mainly for the self-entertainment of the reviewer, if not for more base motives’. The difference, for me, is in the tone adopted and in an intent that shifts from constructive to gratuitous and exhibitionist (Bennie 16).

While the hatchet job review is by no means a purely Aussie phenomenon, Australians arts culture has enough of a history of them for Angela Bennie to compile the best—or is that worst?—of them in *Crème de la Phlegm*:



*Unforgettable Australian Reviews.* Bennie's selections, coming after her deeply thoughtful contextual essay, run from the 1950s to the 2010s, and include books, theatre, film and visual art. Fittingly, Bennie's selection opens with a review in which poet A.D. Hope calls Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge' (Hope 73). That line—the review's final phrase—resonates still, even as the detail of the rest of the review has long faded. It is, for example, the phrase that makes it into Elizabeth Webby's entry on Patrick White in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accompanied by Webby's observation that 'White never forgot or forgave this, and remained wary of academics for the rest of his life.'

A more recent example of snark is Michael Hofmann's unpleasant, aggressive 'look at me' review of Richard Flanagan's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

The book was described as having gone through many drafts, with Flanagan using those that didn't make it to 'light the barbie'. I can't help thinking this wasn't the right one to spare. (Hofmann)

Hofmann's review inspired an equally unpleasant, aggressive, 'look at me' response from A.C. Grayling, the chair of the 2014, Booker Prize: 'Whatever construction one places on Michael Hofmann's review of Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road of the Deep North*, it is obvious it was written on a bad haemorrhoid day' (Grayling). It seems to me that Flanagan's book is superfluous to this exchange of insults.

Richard Flanagan is an author who seems to attract more than his fair share of snark. The critic Peter Craven, in his review of Flanagan's 2001 novel *Gould's Book of Fish*, said, 'It is, however, a monstrosity of a book' (385). Elsewhere, Craven defends the principle of the negative review: 'there should be no objection to their being savage' (Goldsworthy). I respectfully disagree, but I cannot offer 'evidence' to 'prove' my point. Craven's review argues that *Gould's Book of Fish* shows hints of its potential, but that it is sloppy and lacks drama (Craven 384-5; Bennie 26-8). I happen to disagree, but that hardly matters. It is Craven's tone rather than his assessment of Flanagan's book that I disfavour, because it exalts provocation, as entertainment as well as a critical stance. That said, a poorly constructed positive review can equally put a critic on the wrong sort of pedestal: 'Be awed at how learned, deep and downright smart I am to recognise that *The Tree of Man* is a truly great book.'

I do not suggest that a fiercely critical response is always unacceptable. At times, a critic's denunciation can stem from serious ethical or political objections. One example of this is Stella Clarke's review of my novel *Figurehead* (2009) in

*Australian Literary Review*. *Figurehead* attempts a satirical reading of modern Cambodian and Cambodian-global politics, dominated by the murderous Khmer Rouge regime (1975-9). Clarke begins by saying, 'It's just not clear what new layer of absurdity Allington hopes to have added', and ends by suggesting that I leave the writing of novels 'to writers who think that people's lives actually matter' (20). I do not selectively quote Clarke to endorse her criticism—unsurprisingly, I see it differently—or to belatedly argue back. I do so to acknowledge the legitimacy of a reader response that rejects not merely the product of a creative endeavour but its very motivations. If Clarke believes I adopt a shoddy attitude to the importance of human suffering, she cannot possibly respond any way but personally. Also legitimate is George Burchett's response to *Figurehead*, given that one of the novel's central characters, Ted Whittlemore, is inspired by Burchett's father, the leftist journalist Wilfred Burchett. From my author's perspective, 'Ted Whittlemore' is not 'Wilfred Burchett' renamed—in other words, *Figurehead* is not a biography in disguise. But it would be disingenuous of me to imagine that a family member might accept such a disclaimer.

Nonetheless, I see these examples as the exception to the rule. In any case, there is no particular need for me to find common ground with Hope, Hoffman or Craven—each to their own. But a delineated reading of strongly negative reviews sometimes reveals elements of the hatchet job but also elements of constructive criticism. For example, while I read *The Tree of Man* differently to Hope, I am drawn to his sceptical comments about 'the mythical Great Australian Novel' and his recognition that *The Tree of Man* is 'the story of the simple': 'In spite of some serious defects of manner, he really has, as his publishers claim, one essential of the great novelist: the ability to create real people and a real world for them to live in' (70). Hope's prose possesses a startling energy, his sentences a capacity to dig deep. Still, he remains responsible for the line in the review that most endures, a disrespectful and lazy slap.

Similarly, part of Hoffman's irritation appears to be directed at the critical reception Flanagan's *The Narrow Road of the Deep North* has enjoyed. He complains that 'some reviewers reached for their Tolstoy; others forbade any comparisons at all', a collective response he sees as akin to 'watching tourists hoaxed by polystyrene'. While I do not agree with Hoffman that the novel was 'almost universally adored', I do share some frustration about the critical response. But I believe Hoffman does an imperfect book a disservice by making it somehow responsible for the praise it received. In doing so, he misses an opportunity to engage more constructively with these more positive critical responses, which are not themselves identical.

Given that this discussion has dwelled on the tone and language of book criticism, here I draw on four of my published reviews to offer representative examples of my commingled tempered praise and tempered criticism. All four reviews appeared in Saturday editions the *Adelaide Advertiser*, a Murdoch-owned daily tabloid, and each was between 500 and 540 words in length. The first three reviews I refer to here are broadly positive, while the fourth—on Tim Winton’s *Eyrie*—is broadly negative. I offer these examples, albeit briefly, because a discussion of tone seems incomplete without them. However, I do so mindful that quoting myself is a tiresome exercise best avoided.

In a review of Thomas Keneally’s 2012 novel *The Daughters of Mars*, about Australian nurses in World War I, I argue that,

At times, history weighs heavily upon the book, as if there is a checklist of key events, themes and places that the story must accommodate and explain—including everything from conscientious objection to dodgy military commanders. Keneally writes insightfully about courtship in war, and yet the men Sally and Naomi fall in love with are only moderately interesting characters, and their periodic presence saps a little of the story’s momentum. The novel’s ending, too, falls slightly flat. (Allington, ‘*Daughters*’)

The modulated criticism is deliberate: I precisely mean ‘only moderately interesting characters’ rather than ‘dull as dishwater’; I precisely mean ‘falls slightly flat’ rather than ‘is utterly tedious’. Despite the problems inherent in turning history into historical fiction—problems hardly unique to Keneally—I admire Keneally’s relentlessly enthusiastic approach to telling historical tales through fiction, and, in this particular novel, his desire, albeit somewhat strained, to both mark the contribution of nurses to the war effort and to remind readers that war is not noble. *The Daughters of Mars* is not a great book—or even close to a great book—but it succeeds, to a point, on its own terms.

My review of Michelle de Kretser’s Miles Franklin Literary Award-winning novel *Questions of Travel* (2012) describes a book that is not uniformly brilliant but that contains brilliant passages:

De Kretser sets the story’s foundations slowly—the novel is one-third over before it comes fully to life—but from this unpromising beginning emerges startlingly subtle observations on the human spirit and passages of superb, stinging prose. (Allington, ‘*Questions*’)

The long slow opening, roughly one-third of a 500-page book, is a significant flaw, but it does not invalidate the ‘devastating and beautifully constructed

ending' (Allington, 'Questions') Similarly, although the story sometimes slips 'towards over-explanation of ideas' and has 'thematic scaffolding that sometimes pokes through', at other times de Kretser demonstrates a heightened ability to engage with deeply political issues and moments.

In my largely positive review of Nicholas Rothwell's novel, *Belomor*—or at least I take it to be a novel—I suggest that the story is 'packed full of deep—sometimes unfathomable—contemplations'. This sounds a little—even to me, reading it back—as if I am straining for a way to assess a book I did not understand. My point, however, is that the novel affected me in the way few works of fiction do: it entirely disrupted my contemplation of the world. As my review puts it,

*Belomor* is exhilarating, challenging and draining. It's an odd book, too, but that's to Rothwell's credit, for he is a writer who interprets Australia and the world in startling and original ways. The story's final pages are slightly less enthralling than the rest of the book but that's perhaps because conventional books come with certain in-built restrictions. The existence of a final page, a final sentence, presupposes some sort of climax, but *Belomor* would be better suited to looping back and beginning all over again. (Allington, 'Belomor')

My reviews of Keneally's *The Daughters of Mars*, de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* and Rothwell's *Belomor* all contain tempered praise mixed with tempered criticism. If they all conform to the description of 'compliment sandwich', so be it: each book, in different ways, contains elements worth applauding, and I see no particular need to avoid a form.

It is also possible to write a mainly negative review—as I did with Tim Winton's novel *Eyrie*—without suggesting that a book has no redeeming qualities and without trying to assault the author on the page, as if doing so is the only way to demonstrate how attuned my critical faculties are: 'Watch me do a number on the revered author of *Cloudstreet*'. My review of *Eyrie* includes elements of praise, calling it 'a tense and at times gripping story about lives gone askew, individuals losing control and the vexing challenges of surviving, rebuilding and pushing on' (Allington, 'Eyrie'). Indeed, the novel does have moments that succeed, moments to savour, even if the book itself, in my view, is laboured. The juxtaposition of positives and negatives that follows in my appraisal is a conscious and sincere attempt to sift through positives and negatives. I argue that the dysfunction of Keeley, the central character, sometimes 'seems ratcheted up and repetitive, as if designed to ensure that readers cannot miss the point' (Allington, 'Eyrie'). I suggest that the story under-explores two key women characters. I argue that

Some themes, including domestic violence, class, redemption, the effects of childhood events on adult lives, and the competing claims of nature and progress, sometimes—only sometimes—sit awkwardly on the page, as if slightly abstracted from the characters.

I conclude that *Eyrie* feels incomplete (the ending is rushed) and yet that the book (like so many contemporary novels) is too long. As well as using the qualifier ‘only sometimes’, I make several positive comments about the novel, including that ‘*Eyrie* contains resonant moments and memorable characters’. The descriptions ‘resonant’ and ‘memorable’ are words that, as a critic, I no doubt overuse—Goldsworthy’s reference to ‘Book Review Bingo card’, featuring overused terms in criticism, is embarrassingly apt here. Nonetheless, I prefer familiar language to employing a rarefied, coded vocabulary that excludes non-specialists. Some of the themes present in *Eyrie*—especially domestic violence, class, and the competing claims of nature and progress—are critical issues in contemporary Australia. It is worth wrestling constructively, rather than contemptuously, with Winton when he does readers the courtesy of wrestling with the world.

To this point, I have advocated a personal approach to literature that begins with my foundational philosophy as a critic, that it is an achievement to write a reasonably good novel or short story. Judging books one at a time, I stand by this approach. But I end this essay by speaking back, and complicating, my conclusions.

Although I stand by my ‘glass half full approach’ to reviewing, I am conscious that my reviews contain considered but instant judgments. But a critic’s opinion of a book—as with that any other reader—can change over time. The reader changes, as does the status of a book itself, moving from infancy into a long adulthood. A critic writes in the immediate moment before or just after publication, whereas it can take years or decades for a book’s legacy to become apparent. Some books, whatever their initial reception, do not warrant re-reading. They are fixed in the moment of first reading, like a chalk drawing on a pavement. But other books have reputations that will grow or shrink in time. For example, I recently revisited Charlotte Wood’s Stella Prize-winning novel, *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), a book I did not review. I appreciated the book on my first reading of it, but also found myself sometimes unconvinced by the mix of realism and allegory Wood employs. But on a later re-reading of the novel—which I undertook, in part, to satisfy a nagging sense that I may have missed the point—I became more convinced by the removed-from-the-world setting Wood has employed to tackle the theme of misogyny.

In contrast, I think a little less of Tom Keneally's *The Daughters of Mars* than when I first reviewed it. But in probing why this is so, I find myself drawing away from *The Daughters of Mars* in isolation, instead placing it amongst various similar historically-themed Keneally novels—and nodding again at Brady's suggestion that he 'has always been a writer who mattered, even when he is writing too much too quickly'.

This leads to a more significant concern for me. If I shift from assessing novels on an individual basis to take a panoramic, retrospective and collective view, I feel less comfortable about a landscape littered with tempered praise. Although I still, more or less, endorse each individual review as written, 'pretty good' is culturally more palatable applied to one book than it is to many years or to a library of books.

This bringing together of works can often have a dulling effect. For example, the placing together several decades of snarky reviews in *Crème de la Phlegm*, for me, is to the detriment of each individual review. Collectively, their impact—their passion, their anger, their outrage at the failures the critics see before them—quickly become dulled and repetitive, even though an individual review removed from the collection—say A.D. Hope on Patrick White—still fizzes.

I see no solution to this problem of so much 'good' fiction and so little 'great' fiction. Indeed, to call it a 'problem' is not quite right. It registers for me more as a regret, as a nagging sense of opportunities lost, and perhaps as a reflection of a cultural landscape that wrestles with definitions of 'excellence', for political as well as artistic reasons, but that does always stop to recognise that the attainment of excellence is genuinely rare.

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