

The Matter of Fact: Science and Identity in Contemporary Australian Literature

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TO PURSUE ‘KNOWLEDGE *PER SE*’, TO UNLOCK ‘THE SECRETS OF THE ORGANISM’ AND TO act as an explorer ‘not of untrodden lands, perhaps, but of the mysteries of nature’—these are the reasons why the naturalist William Caldwell travels to Australia in Nicholas Drayson’s 2007 novel *Love and the Platypus* (9, 59, 144). Caldwell’s research is ‘purely platypusical’ (98): he aims to determine whether the platypus really does lay eggs. The ‘spirit of discovery—that was why he was here, was it not?’ (3) The spirit of discovery and the obsessive nature of his scientific enquiry appear to characterise Drayson’s protagonist as a scientist. However, as I hope to show in this paper, the definition of the literary scientist-protagonist—or its stereotype, in the words of Roslynn Haynes—is open for debate when it comes to the practice of science in fiction. To prove my point, I investigate how the practice of science in contemporary Australian fiction intertwines with identity narratives. As shown in the following, these narratives revolve around the reasons and ambitions of fictional protagonists to engage with science.

Imaginarities of the scientist in Western culture

Following the idea that popular prejudice is shaped more by images and imaginaries than by demonstrable facts, Haynes’ 2017 book *From Madman to Crime Fighter: The Scientist in Western Culture* traces the representation of the

scientist as a character in different media. Haynes, a Tasmania-based graduate in both science (biochemistry) and humanities (literature), examines scientists particularly in Western literature and film from the thirteenth century onwards, contextualising them in the social, cultural, and intellectual climate of their time (3). In so doing, she opens a window on what contemporary representations and interpretations of the scientist share with their cultural historical and intermedia pasts. She discovers that very few actual scientists have contributed to the popular image of ‘the scientist’ (3). In her book, she carves out seven distinct stereotypes of the scientist that she calls semiotic figures—clarifying an abstraction from the realistic. Haynes is interested in the scientist’s imaginary in culture, or, what Glen Scott Allen in his analysis of images of scientists in American culture terms ‘the *perceived* truth’ of the scientist-stereotype (8). According to Haynes, the stereotypes that she identifies are expressions of their creators’ response to the role of science and technology in a particular temporal and social context, a mirror for reflections of ideas taboo in their own time, and therefore fascinating in their own right. Viewed chronologically over several centuries, Haynes argues, they achieve additional historical significance as ‘ideological markers of the changing perception of science over time’ (4). Representations of scientists in different media thus provide proof that science is a powerful and mutable cultural force.

According to Haynes, the vast majority of scientist stereotypes are maniacal, obsessed with their activities (which are mostly research) to the point of madness and moral compromise, if not completely dangerous, evil and dissociated from society. They embody our fear of too much knowledge or the belief that some things should remain hidden and unknown. There is, for instance, the scientist-mould of the morally suspect alchemist, which is, as Haynes underlines, the most frequently recurring and predominantly male stereotype. He engages in the pursuit of arcane intellectual goals and sinister, ideologically evil or quasi-magical, (allegedly) unlawful endeavours. This type lives on in the many mad scientists populating our cinemas, comic books and other media throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—a ruthless, megalomaniac fellow who does not feel responsible for the results of his research (or anything else). Dr John Parker in Blanche D’Alpuget’s 1993 novel *White Eye* may serve as an Australian fictional example for this particularly prominent stereotype. Parker is a coldblooded researcher at a Molecular Biology and Biotechnology Research Centre using unethical and questionable methods to produce and test a vaccine against a virus that he more or less invented, a vaccine with human infertility as a side-effect. Parker does not only aim to use the highly infectious and extremely virulent virus as a weapon against overpopulation, but also engages in atrocious crimes in order to enforce his goal. Other scientist stereotypes are the charismatic adventurer-type, who explores new territories or concepts and is frequently embodied in space travellers; the idealistic scientist, who struggles with moral conflict and human values in relation to his science or technology; the unemotional scientist,

who does not engage in human interaction, relationships or social life in the cause of science; and the 'stupid virtuoso', who lives in spheres beyond social intercourse and the real world, ignoring social obligations. The way gynaecologist and researcher Mara Fox describes her work space (and thus herself) in Peter Goldsworthy's novel *Honk if you are Jesus* gives an idea of this type of scientist:

I had always loved this world: the world of the operating theatre. Inhuman describes it best, some claim, but it is the world I most trust: the sterile corridors, the scrubbed floors and walls, the stainless-steel trays and trolleys. It is a world without feeling or ornament, a world stripped to a utilitarian minimum, where forms are matched perfectly to functions: wall clocks, overhead lighting, stainless-steel sinks, instruments arranged in gleaming, logical arrays. (17-18)

A peculiarly twentieth-century character, finally, is the helpless scientist, who faces the loss of control over his research and its results, or is forced by external agents to change his scientific focus (Haynes, *From Madman* 6).

Haynes also points out, however, that 'pure' scientist-stereotypes have dwindled since the 1990s, giving way to characters 'modelled on ordinary people whose science intersects with their other human concerns—family, friendships, love, loss, grief and leisure' ('Whatever Happened' 35). According to Haynes, this development echoes a decrease of ignorance and fear of science, an increase of acceptance of scientists as professional members of society, and the emergence of alternative characters taking on the science-villain's role: insane gunmen, religious fanatics, terrorists and destroyers of the environment (42). Expanding on Haynes' work, Anton Kirchhofer and Natalie Roxburgh show how contemporary novelists are increasingly using non-stereotypical, complex scientist characters to engage with and elaborate on the intricate relationship between science and society (Kirchhofer and Roxburgh). Adding to these recent insights, this paper examines science practitioners in two recently published Australian novels, asking what sort of narratives emerge from what kind of relationship between science and society in stories that revolve around 'non-stereotypical' fictional scientists who venture beyond the limits of Haynes' scientist categories and science definition.

Haynes' understanding of 'science' is based on Karl Popper's criterion that scientific status of a theory is defined by its falsifiability (refutability): it is 'not sufficient to accumulate an incessant stream of confirmations, of observations that can be seen as verifying a theory'; rather, the theory 'must make risky predictions that can be objectively tested for falsity' (Haynes, *From Madman* 11). At no point does Haynes explore or trespasses the limits of this definition: she does not look at scientists who use scientific methods to understand nature, but make no risky

predictions; who follow risky scientific goals but do not employ strict scientific methods; who accumulate scientific 'data' but base their understanding of sciences on shaky foundations; who approach nature with a 'scientific' mind-set and methods of science only to discover something else (for example, themselves), or fail to translate their efforts and results into facts. Stretching Haynes' definition of 'science', this paper investigates, through a close reading of two Australian texts, how fictional protagonists, in the process of building their own scientist identities, ultimately fail to persuade others that certain (or their own) scientific hypotheses are true. The very conditions of science and scientific knowledge are thus at the heart of my discussion, which focuses on the 2006 novel *Rifling Paradise* by Jem Poster and on Toni Jordan's 2010 novel *Fall Girl*.

Rifling Paradise and *Fall Girl* present science as a parameter of narrative and selfhood, and explore how the practice of science constructs selfhood and creates identity. Identity and science are here constructed in relation to one another, and they are both challenged and contested by the scientist-protagonists' surroundings. The two novels not only evoke *and* destroy the stereotype of the scientist but also inquire into the relationship between methods of science, the legitimacy and credibility of scientific knowledge, and their societal contexts. In contrast to nonfiction, Adam Trexler explains, 'fiction is understood as the product of social ideas, cultural beliefs, and individual imagination. And yet, fiction is said to express truths that cannot be described by direct, declarative writing (Trexler 29). *Rifling Paradise* and *Fall Girl* are interesting objects of study that bring to light some startling assumptions about, prejudices against, and responses to scientist-protagonists. These include fears, criticisms and desires regarding science that are reminiscent of those appearing in our contemporary media.

'What's it all for, anyway, this killing and skinning?' Jem Poster's *Rifling Paradise*

Jem Poster's 2006 novel *Rifling Paradise* reflects what Jane Camerini describes as a new appreciation for the practice of science and 'the activities and products of science' (Camerini 354), generating a more complex picture of the labour and the characters involved in natural history pursuits. It also echoes the increasing interest in, on the one hand, historical science figures and the historical dimensions of science-related human turmoil, and, on the other, characters depicted 'with a new level of understanding and empathy' (Haynes, 'Whatever Happened' 37). *Rifling Paradise* is the story of Charles Redbourne, a nineteenth-century English landowner who travels to Australia in order to pursue his ambition as an amateur naturalist; that is, to shoot, skin, stuff and collect specimens. In Sydney he engages in debate with his host's daughter, and later travels to the outback guided by an Aboriginal boy and by a 'brute' who is 'prepared to haggle like a fairground huckster' (73), a hunter of nature's rarities.

Fever, opium, and hallucinations in which the violated land haunts the protagonist finally cause him to flee back to England.

From childhood onwards, Charles has been fascinated by fossil-hunting trips and has dreamed of engaging in scientific enquiry and becoming a scientist. He has published notes and articles in minor periodicals. He 'was, as collectors phrase it, a specialist' (20). In Australia, Charles does not merely aim to add significantly to his collection and to contribute his 'quota to the sum of human knowledge' (19), but also engages full-time in the practice of natural science as a means of redefining himself and his life, which has been unsatisfactory and unlucky in Europe (where he was accused of having been involved in homoerotic activities, leading to the suicide of a young boy). Scientists have been his 'heroes' (17), and in Australia he wants to become one himself. He strives to (re)construct his identity through science.

Charles tries to find out what the natural world (including himself) is really like, and appears to explore nature in order to ascertain how it works, asking how humanity can best comprehend different aspects of the world—which is how a scientist may be defined (Ashman and Baringer 1). 'All science', Charles explains, 'is grounded in facts. A collector's cabinet is a repository of facts from which important scientific truths may be deduced, and new theories constructed. We need these collections [...] if we're to understand the world we live in—it's as simple as that' (67). He justifies the slaughter of cabinets full of Australian bird-life by stating:

The thing is that slight variations between individuals—variations that might be overlooked in the field—could turn out to be important from a scientific viewpoint. At best, close examination might show one of these birds to be a new species. At the very least the group provides a valuable record, a basis for future research. (107)

In contrast to his 'rarity hunting' fellow traveller—who wants to catch the extraordinary, the out-of-order curiosity—Charles is interested in comprehensiveness and 'the detheatricalisation of nature' (Goodall 28). He studies beings as 'type specimens'—selected for the absence of any exceptional features, and based on the exclusion of vitality. He focuses on the normative and regular. In so doing he is a classic representative of the scientific mode practiced by the Royal Society in the (mid to late) nineteenth century (28). Scientists then and now presumably make 'progress' if their predictions become more accurate, more numerically precise, or encompass a broader range of phenomena (Ashman and Baringer 12; Waller 100). Charles Redbourne, however, does not produce or contribute to any knowledge, nor does he reach any scientific conclusions at a rate coherent with the accumulation of relevant data. Charles is a naturalist portrayed

at a time when distinct science disciplines were gaining their professional status (and needed to be legitimised as emerging fields of research). His approach to the natural world embodies concerns that have already occupied many philosophers of science: without preconceived opinions, how is the researcher able to select facts from the immense abundance of collected material, and only those facts simple enough to permit lawful connections to become evident (see Holton 99)? Indeed, as iconoclastically pointed out by John Waller, preconception is a pivotal component of rationally conceived scientific investigation, and theories usually precede large-scale accumulations of facts (Waller 100, 102). In *Rifling Paradise*, although expecting ‘significant discoveries’ (35), Charles does not have any hypothesis or theory—in the words of Michael Shermer, no ‘testable statement accounting for a set of observations’ (19).¹ Soon after his arrival in Australia, he confesses that he was having great ‘difficulty in coping with the influx of specimens’ (106). His science is soon called into question by Eleanor, the girl whom he finally marries and who—as both an artist and antivivisectionist—is appalled by Charles’ daily taxidermist tasks undertaken for the sake of science, or more precisely, for the ‘degree of authority’ (52) that Charles strives to regain through his science. As it turns out, his travel to Australia is primarily ego-driven, guided by the desire to become one of the nation’s heroes. It is therefore not surprising that he can hardly defend his scientific activities against critical examination, which has far-reaching consequences for his individual ‘ontological’ path and (re)constructed identity. Eleanor asks:

What’s it all for, anyway, this killing and skinning? [...] what kind of a fact is it, your dead lory? [...] Whatever it is you imagine you’re laying hold of—for yourself, for your precious science—it’s gone the moment you pull the trigger. (67)

What you’re left with is a handful of skin and feathers—the sort of thing a milliner might use to dress a hat. It’s dead stuff, dry as dust, and nothing’s going to bring back the bird you had in your sights when you took aim. You’d better [...] try to catch something of its life. (68)

In contrast to Charles, Eleanor, the artist, *can* catch something of the animal’s life in her paintings. Although her paintings of flowers and birds are not ‘the kind of study that might have graced the pages of a botanical handbook’, she is able to capture their ‘vital essence’ (69). Charles comprehends:

By some expressive sleight of hand, Eleanor had contrived to suggest, more or less simultaneously, both the brute fact of death and the

¹ For more context with respect to Charles’s approach to nature, and an analysis of the particular nineteenth-century state of science (between taxonomising observation and enthusiastic collecting), see Camerini.

vibrant life from which the creature had been plucked; and it was in that poignant double focus that [he] discovered a truth which none of the morning's cutting and probing had succeeded in laying bare. (116-17)

Realising this, Charles slowly revises his approach to nature. Thus, while suffering in the outback, and in addition to being confronted with Aboriginal knowledge and appreciation of life in nature, he finally begins to impeach his belief in his own science's potential to pave the way for future scientific discoveries through killing and classifying. Charles wonders 'not entirely playfully, whether Adam's fall might have begun not with the eating of a fruit but earlier, with the arising of the desire to catalogue the animals and plants in his teeming paradise' (188). As he plunges deeper into the Australian wilderness, he cultivates a flexibility of mind and comes to understand that his practice of science and the expectations he had of his journey were sophisticated modes of ignorance, essentially without meaning. He understands that his 'approach to the natural world is imaginative rather than analytical' and it was brought home to him that his 'expectations concerning this part of [the] journey had been tinged with fantasy' (212). Consequently, when leaving Australia, he discards all the many animals he has slain and stuffed (320), which thwarts the common notion that collectors and naturalists were proto-scientists, setting the scene for future progress. As a consequence, the angle of possibility through which he views the principles of natural formation widens. Jem Poster's novel thus depicts a fictional scientist who raises issues of the compatibility of science with the appreciation of Australia's natural beauty, and the role art plays in shaping science-led perceptions.

Charles' scientific principles and his 'data' in the form of killed wildlife—that is, an approach to science which is aimed at conclusions based on external validation—are called into question by representatives of other approaches to nature, and morph into conclusions based on internal insights. Crucially challenged by an artist, the protagonist in *Rifling Paradise* changes from a believer in science and a confident taxidermist into a vegan admirer of life in nature. He discovers sublimity and a marvellous order not merely in nature but in the world of thought and art. Thanks to the artist's influence, Charles begins to examine plants with different eyes, 'not with a botanist's interest but with the curiosity of a child', and slips beneath 'the dazzling surfaces of things' (188, 127). Being questioned on his trust in catalogued, evidence-based science thus stimulates the protagonist's capacity to re-imagine reality—and his self.

‘The science? You actually faked it well enough to fool him?’ Toni Jordan’s *Fall Girl*

Scientists have a duty to reveal to the public their insight into the world’s mechanism. They are the beacons of rationality, lighting the trail for those who wish to use that most powerful and precious of devices, the human brain. They light the beacons for those who wish to escape the prejudice of those who, through irrational belief and faith in the ultimately unknowable, live lives blighted by others. (Barrow 124)

Throughout his youth and adolescence, the protagonist in *Rifling Paradise* had dreamed daily of following in the footsteps of Darwin, whom he tries to imitate in his early collecting trips around Europe. But at the end of his journey in Australia, Charles Redbourne admits that he had just been ‘playing the role of one of the heroes of [his] childhood reading’ (249). Della Gilmore, the protagonist in *Fall Girl*, a 2010 novel by Toni Jordan (who is trained as a molecular biologist), also plays the role of—or rather imitates—a scientist, albeit in a different way.

Della is the scion of a family of ‘gentlemen and lady con artists that goes back generations’, experts in making ‘castles in the air, using nothing but [their] imaginations’ (103, 217). Her father and grandfather travelled the country in a buggy selling ‘Ol’ Doc Grayson’s Magical Elixir good for bursitis, thrombitis, arthritis and anything that ails you at county fairs’ (183). Comfortable with conning people, and seeking to secure funding, Della pretends to be an evolutionary biologist, invents a PhD and a personal webpage, contrives a sham research project to trap an extinct animal (a Tasmanian tiger) in a National Park near Melbourne, and invites an external university partner and potential sponsor into ‘her office’ in the Zoology Department to discuss funding business. ‘Her office’ is a secretly occupied, formerly empty university room, carefully equipped with fake scientific papers and awards lying around for anyone to see. Della does a few hours of research on the internet, on how to do research, and teaches herself how to sound ‘sufficiently scientific, which is all that matters. Jargon intimidates everybody’ (29). Taken by surprise by her millionaire patron’s question of what a broad taxonomic survey is (‘I wasn’t expecting anything technical’), she ‘winged it’ successfully (29). With respect to her new scientist identity (and her ‘science’), Della’s brother draws an apt interim conclusion: ‘You actually faked it well enough to fool him? Thank God for brainless men of privilege’ (169).

While *Rifling Paradise* conveys historical knowledge about the practice of science² and, right from the start, affects the contemporary reader’s understanding of

² The novel’s fictitious events are located in a carefully described historical milieu and presented chronologically; its protagonist is based on (a compilation of) historical models, which is why,

history and historiography, enhancing if not modifying it, *Fall Girl* perfectly illustrates (if not surpasses) Andrea Battistini's discovery that fictional scientists may take on the shape of a specific literary transcultural scamp-archetype, the *picaro*:

Upon closer inspection, scientists, when observing nature, are rather like *picaros* who, following their explorative instinct, confer on speculative investigation a sense of adventure, of itinerant quest, fitting snugly in the narrative scheme of the romance. The scientist's knowledge has a driving quality similar to that of a traveller, a *picaro*, experiencing life on the road, the chronotope of encounters and surprises, because of that element of casualness always underpinning all discoveries. (39)

In *Fall Girl*, the central fake-scientist Della follows her 'explorative instinct', confers on 'speculative investigation a sense of adventure' and experiences the chronotope of encounters and surprises in the way *picaros* do (Battistini 39). *Picaro*-like, she does not experience a significant process of moral education; she moves horizontally through space and vertically through society (Guillén 84), and lives an un-sedentary life that consists of restlessly meandering between 'projects' with a touch of delinquency. Reinventing herself as a scientist, she cannot be anything but a dodgy, fraudulently clever societal outsider and *isolata* (Jürgens 368-71, 399-400). In accordance with the picaresque tradition, Della's play between self-concealment and self-revelation, masking and unmasking, bears an intrinsic performative quality (Honold on the literary *picaro*, 201). In fact, by fooling her millionaire—that is, her audience—with facts that appear to be scientifically plausible, Della behaves like a performer, staging science as a show.

In order to dispel the millionaire's last doubts about the soundness of her scientific knowledge and relevance of her project, Della invites him to a field trip to the National Park, where she tells him 'little factoids' about the life of Darwin and 'a bit about the theory' (92). She busies herself with measuring and photographing tracks and collecting droppings. Della's 'scientist caper' progresses well, as science 'is not as difficult as it sounds. One must exude confidence, that's all' (42, 116). In the National Park, her potential sponsor asks only 'the occasional question about evolutionary biology in general': nothing she cannot handle (92). Here, if not before, it becomes clear that *Fall Girl* imparts a misleading idea of how science tends to progress and reduces *ad absurdum* the scientists' claim to epistemological authority and methodological autonomy, and their implicit trust in reductionism (Barrow 123). This is further illustrated by the fact that her sponsor turns out to

following Erik Schilling's definition (*Der Historische Roman* 55), the text can be called a *realistic historical novel*.

be an evolutionary biologist himself who uses a university degree as his trump card in the game of outsmarting the con-scientist. To top it all off, as we learn at the very end, he faked his Harvard degree—being a fake-scientist himself. As in *Rifling Paradise*, albeit in a very different setting and time, the (re)construction of a new identity through science ultimately fails. By depriving the scientist of any virtuous, upright characteristics, *Fall Girl* is a final death knell for what Nathaniel Pallone and James Hennessy call the ‘Myth of the Noble Scientist’, which (in the footsteps of Francis Bacon) celebrates the scientist as incapable of misbehaving in the smallest way and as impervious to the baser human drives (31). By inventing rather than domesticating the unknown, Della is a glorious caricature of the scientist stereotypes mapped out by Haynes, incarnating nothing less than the bankruptcy of the confining rationality of science.

Like Charles Redbourne in *Rifling Paradise*, the two fictional ‘scientists’ in Jordan’s novel do not base their activities on a ‘well-supported and well-tested hypothesis or set of hypotheses’ (Shermer 19); they do not even collect ‘real data’ since all that matters is their confidence. However, *Fall Girl* does not merely set up a caricatured monument for the untrustworthy scientist-picaro, it also manifests the power of fiction in an ambivalent *science con-text*. Thus, according to Della, science, ‘at least this kind of science, is more like a country craft; it is a manual skill, a dextrous one, where the clever hands of clever people make a story from bits of bone and photos of tracks and scratches on trees’ (117). This definition is remarkable as it fuses the imaginary of science and the Latin term ‘fictor’ (on which the word ‘fiction’ is based). Originally, a fictor was not merely an inventor of stories, but a sculptor creating three-dimensional artefacts with his clever hands (Japp 47). We can conclude that in *Fall Girl*, science is fiction.

A matter of fact and identity: science and society in *Rifling Paradise* and *Fall Girl*

People always think that success in this business is about lying but it’s the opposite of that—It’s about telling the truth. (Jordan 19)

Fall Girl and *Rifling Paradise* are autodiegetic life stories that, in a fictional setting, trace how scientific knowledge is gained. They chart science as it is practiced, rife with the challenges of collecting samples in messy field work, and examine its role in establishing professional credibility. In both texts, Australian wildlife appears as a resource for new knowledge of the natural world, offering novel opportunities for the protagonists to acquire and shape such knowledge. Australia is depicted as a country that in the words of Della ‘has always been a place where people have dragged themselves ashore and begun new lives’ (Jordan 150)—in this case, through the matrix of science. If the drive to explore new frontiers, to rebel against the status quo, on the one hand, and the knack for seeing things in a different light,

on the other, are essential characteristics of scientists, as stated in Jack Oliver's *Incomplete Guide to the Art of Discovery* (35, 37, 43), then Charles Redbourne and Della are scientists.

However, the protagonist in *Rifling Paradise* can hardly be called a scientist when scrutinised through the lens of Haynes' abovementioned Popper-based definition: although he collects and accumulates observations ('data'), ultimately, he does not have a theory. In contrast, by making risky predictions, and striving to verify and test them through data collection, the picara in *Fall Girl* does fit into Haynes' scheme—but is a genuine *fake* scientist. Della and Charles do not trigger any paradigm shift, and clearly do not fit into the traditional dichotomy of the scientist as hero or villain (see Shepherd-Barr's analysis of scientist protagonists on the theatre stage, 244). They fail to produce or present results that allow one to describe 'a reality in space and time which is independent of ourselves' (Philipp Frank, quoted in Holton 91), which could be defined as a goal in science. They also embody a counterattack on P. W. Atkins' statement that scientists are privileged 'to be at the summit of knowledge, and to see further into truth than any of their contemporaries' (123). Charles is one of those who, by seeking to discover the unknown, risks disappearing into the nothingness he is striving to define or to invent (cf. wrapper). *Fall Girl*, on the other hand, is not merely the confession of a liar (Guillén 92) who, by presenting the scientific endeavour as an act of creative invention, questions the concept of scientific data and 'truth'. She also incarnates the problematic relationship between social and science conventions, individual reality experiences and creative make-believe. The two texts are examples of how contemporary fiction explores, but also derides, rejects and satirises, science and its epistemological questions concerning the intelligibility and nature of nature. Both novels manifest different dimensions of how literature raises, tests, confirms, complicates and even parodies the process of knowledge acquisition through collection of scientific specimens and the classification of organisms, or, in other words, through the assembly of data: *Rifling Paradise* features a fictional naturalist striving—and struggling—to create a collection of dead animals as a data treasure trove for future research, but finally discovers fantasy in science; *Fall Girl* presents a fake scientist who performs science as fiction while pretending to search for an extinct animal. In these two stories, it seems, science is in the process of becoming something different, which is why these texts are reminiscent of George Levine's discovery regarding Victorian fiction: that science is not a monolithic entity, 'its boundaries are never absolute, its definition never certain' (15)—but is easily invented. Whereas, in the imaginary narrations of Haynes' 'classical' scientist stereotypes (see introduction), actual work methods tend to be of interest only if they uncover iffy or criminal facts, scientific work methods and practice in *Fall Girl* and *Rifling Paradise* are foregrounded at the expense of results—in fact, there are no results at all, as the science conducted by their protagonists leads to nothing. It is non-science. Why, then, do these problematic fictional scientists matter?

Rifling Paradise and *Fall Girl* are powerful fictional narratives that show that the (re)construction of identity through science cannot possibly take place in a vacuum. Charles and Della are 'independent scholars' in their own right; they pursue their quest for new knowledge outside the controls of academic institutions and peers, partly in secrecy. Detached from scientific institutions, they are (thus) lost in their respective societies and cut off from social relevance. The blend of scientific and identity discourses in these novels highlights the need to embed science in society, for instance in order for tentative discoveries to gain recognition as 'hard facts'. These two texts paint literary scenarios of the failure of reaching 'new' knowledge in the absence of successful engagement with the social process of certification. They can be read as a social commentary on the role society plays in the successful conduct of science, which adds to Kirchhofer's and Roxburgh's analysis of the function of non-stereotypical fictional scientist characters:

Fiction may help general as well as scientist readers to find new ways of engaging with 'science and society' in both directions: in relation to the role and relevance of science in various forms of social settings, and also in relation to the role of social, individual, and cultural factors built into the practise of science for whose critical analysis and discussion scientific discourses themselves provide little space. The construction of complex scientist characters as problematic individuals appears as the privileged device for realising this potential. (167)

Within this context, the role of contemporary historical novels is particularly interesting. They have not only become increasingly popular (see above)³ but also face a task and challenge similar to the science novel: to represent in a credible manner the discipline they explore and to retain the interest of their readers in the narrative (Haynes, 'Bringing Science' 129). *Rifling Paradise* opens a window on the historical past in order to show what contemporary scientists and readers share with it. At the same time, it is an Australian example of what has been termed 'new realism' in literature written after 2000, or 'post-postmodern' literature (Schilling 217). As such, Jem Poster's novel leaves postmodern plurality, multiperspectivity and metafictional strategies behind: it has no juxtaposition of historical and postmodern perspectives, no simultaneous presence of different narrative voices, no implicit challenges of historical 'correctness' (285-7). The question of historical coherence is not raised by the narrator or the text; instead, the reader plunges into

³ Other contemporary Australian books featuring scientist protagonists (broadly defined) include the abovementioned novel *Love and Platypus* by Nicholas Drayson, *The Lieutenant* by Kate Grenville and *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* by Carrie Tiffany. Such historical novels embody a fascinating paradox: they claim to be historical insofar as they represent historical facts, and at the same time fictitious as they do so in a literature setting.

the narrator's individual, subjective worldview, his identity crises and biography. Contemporary historical novels such as Poster's explore how, in historical settings, the narrators' past influences the integrity of their identity and their present, and how the narrators themselves perceive that present and future (cf. 285-7). By focusing on the main character's developing scientific maturity, as evidenced in improved scientific practice and knowledge acquisition, *Rifling Paradise*—and likewise *Fall Girl*—approaches the education novel. This adds another dimension to Haynes' description of scientists in contemporary fiction, in which 'the "science experience" is presented as integrated into a psycho-social matrix and thus accessible to the non-specialist reader' ('Bringing Science' 129). As this paper has suggested, it is not only the scientist who appears as the protagonist in contemporary fiction revolving around the practice or performance of science; the context in which science is produced, executed and ultimately legitimised occupies front stage as well. The importance of the societal science-context is such that it might be a good idea to turn Haynes' thought-provoking thesis that the 'message from literature would seem to be that a society produces the scientists it deserves' (*From Madman* 312) into an argument in favour of the inclusion of non-scientists into the cultural bestiary of imaginary scientists.

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