

# Introduction: Book Reviewing in Australia

Patrick Allington and Melinda Harvey

**T**HIS SPECIAL SECTION ON BOOK REVIEWING IN AUSTRALIA EMERGES FROM THE symposium *Critical Matters: Book Reviewing Now*, held at the Wheeler Centre<sup>1</sup> in Melbourne on 9 April 2015 and hosted by Monash University's Centre for the Book. This symposium, the first of its kind ever to take place in Australia, brought together over thirty reviewers, academics, writers, literary editors and publishers to debate a series of 'provocations' on topics such as the necessity of negative reviews, the problem with pitching, the anachronistic nature of critical jargon, the pros and cons of 'clubbishness', and the advent of online reviewing sites. Like the symposium, this special section consciously refuses two premises: namely that, before we even start to talk about book reviewing itself, we have to defend its right to exist or that it is in a state of crisis. Instead, this special section understands book reviewing to be a dynamic field that has influence beyond itself, and that can and should be treated to sustained attention by academics.

The five essays in this special section take three distinct approaches to examine book reviews. Imogen Mathew's 'Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A

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<sup>1</sup> The Wheeler Centre, opened in February 2016 and located in Melbourne's CBD, houses numerous literary organisations and programs talks by local and international writers and thinkers throughout the year.

Case Study of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?* offers a detailed case study of an important memoir about Indigenous identity that garnered reviews from both 'professional' and 'amateur' reviewers, with legal, political and cultural issues in play. Mathew argues that reviews of Heiss' book, particularly those posted on Amazon, Goodreads and personal blogs, exposed elements of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations in Australia and became central to a court case focused around Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act*. In using this example—a book, its author and the critical reception, including the negative and politicised responses of some reviewers—Mathew delves deep into the literary, cultural and political ramifications of a transformed book reviewing landscape where non-professional readers post reviews on non-traditional platforms.

Two of the essays—Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond's 'Taking the Measure of Gender Disparity in Australian Book Reviewing as a Field, 1985 and 2013' and Emmett Stinson's 'How Nice is Too Nice? Australian Book Reviews and the "Compliment Sandwich"'—use quantitative analysis to examine book reviewing as a field and as a form, respectively. Harvey and Lamond survey two publications, *Australian Book Review* and *The Australian* newspaper, across two years, three decades apart, to drill down into the Stella Count's identification of gender disparity in reviewing publications in Australia. Harvey and Lamond find that quantifying changes in scale over this period—for example, in the total number of books being reviewed and the proportion of feature, composite and capsule reviews—offers a more complex picture, and one that ultimately reveals even more pronounced gender disparity than the Stella Count suggests. The study also identifies significant transformations in the way we now 'do' book reviewing in Australia in terms of editorship and publishing, compared with thirty years ago.

Emmett Stinson takes up the question of whether Australian book reviewers are 'too nice', by ascertaining whether book reviews really do tend to comply with the 'compliment sandwich' form—that is, 'four or so paragraphs of positive commentary, then a passing criticism, quickly rescued by affirmation' (Etherington). Stinson applies a mutual appraisal analysis to two recent years of fiction reviewing in *Australian Book Review*. He concludes that there is a culture of 'too nice' reviewing, but goes further, suggesting that the debate over the quality of book reviews acts as a proxy for broader issues, such as the insularity of the Australian literary world.

In contrast to Harvey and Lamond, and Stinson's quantitative investigations, Gillian Dooley's 'True or False? The Role of Ethics in Book Reviewing' and Patrick Allington's 'A Defence of Tempered Praise and Tempered Criticism in Book Reviewing', each take an exegetical approach. Dooley asks if literary criticism can ever be entirely free of ethical judgement. She investigates ethics and reviewing through the prism of her own career as a reviewer and as a book reviews editor,

finding at times an interaction between aesthetics and morality ‘which is hard to disentangle’. Importantly, Dooley sees the role of the reviewer as ‘undertaking a deliberate act of communication with fellow readers’.

Patrick Allington takes a different approach to Stinson to the question of niceness in Australian reviewing, arguing in defence of both tempered praise and tempered criticism. Like Dooley, Allington takes an exegetical approach, examining his own reviewing philosophy—a measured positivity—and offering examples of his reviews. While Allington finds simplistic the dichotomy of ‘soft versus snark’ he nonetheless engages with this broader debate in mounting a defence of tempered praise.

We suggest that all three of these approaches—the use of quantitative methods, exegetical commentary, and case study-style analyses of particular books’ reception—are legitimate ways for the academy to engage with the practice, history and future of book reviewing in Australia, and beyond. As editors, we have not chosen the essays included to look for, or find, common ground – indeed, at times they appear to enter into contest with each other – but rather because, through evidence or reflection, they intervene constructively in or open up new avenues of discussion about book reviewing in Australia. Implicit in all these essays is a sense that academic literary criticism and book reviewing are not antagonists but partners in literary conversation. If the discussions these essays provoke are uncomfortable and, in turn, contested, then so much the better.

**PATRICK ALLINGTON** is a Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Flinders University, and an Adelaide-based writer, editor and critic. His novel, *Figurehead*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, and his short fiction, essays and critical writings have appeared widely.

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### Works Cited

Etherington, Ben. ‘The Poet Tasters.’ *Sydney Review of Books* 30 January 2015. <<http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/australian-poetry-reviewing/>>. 1 Nov. 2016.