



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/CDZS3895>

‘Brigid Magner, Transtasman Literary Imaginaries: Stories from a Cross-Border region’

Dougal McNeill

To cite this book review: Dougal McNeill, ‘Brigid Magner, Transtasman Literary Imaginaries: Stories from a Cross-Border region’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 6 (September 2026): 225-226, <https://doi.org/10.52230/BEEI6926>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Brigid Wagner, *Transtasman Literary Imaginaries: Stories from a Cross-Border Region* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2026), 172pp. Hardback. US\$114.95. ISBN 978-1-6366-7013-3.

The Transtasman is an in-between, not-quite-here, never-really-there cultural space, an area, nowadays, experienced by most people as one of Marc Augé's 'non-places', the inside of an airplane heading between Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. It is an eccentric space, and it is fitting, therefore, that Brigid Wagner has produced an eccentric study, in *Transtasman Literary Imaginaries*, from which to consider its literary archive. I do not mean eccentric here as a term of belittlement. Quite the contrary. *Macquarie* defines it as 'deviating from the recognised or usual character', while the *Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English* has 'eccentric' as 'different, peculiar, irregular.' Wagner, fittingly, holds her subject between the Australian and New Zealand definitions, paying attention to 'interstitial texts' that are 'slippery to categorize when considered through a framework that privileges the national over the regional' (p. 4). The Transtasman, as Wagner uses the term, is 'a social and spatial zone that evades the partitioning of national borders' (p. 167) and that produces 'connections that exceed the nation' (p. 167). In a series of stimulating, thoughtful and clearly argued essays connected to individual texts or groups of texts, Wagner works around and about the Transtasman as a social, cultural, familial, and historical phenomenon, following traces of both settler and Indigenous presences and the co-mingling, contrast, return, and negotiation between, in, and across the two nations. For all of the economic and political interconnections of the two countries, cultural work of this kind remains vanishingly rare: special issues of *Griffith Review* and *Overland* in 2015 to one side, sustained reflection on the interconnections between the two 'national' literatures (and the presence of both social formations *within* those literatures) rarely happens in scholarly or creative ways. The calls to expand stay the exceptions: Terry Sturm wrote for both the *Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981) and the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991); H. Winston Rhodes was an Australian scholar who gave his professional life to promoting New Zealand writing; Lydia Wevers wrote with and to both settings. Wagner's work builds on this tradition.

Her work is 'eccentric' in the other sense too, and all the better for it. Hers are odd choices for study, and their oddness is their interest. The Transtasman, in Wagner's telling, is also what gets lost when a national focus organises literary studies. Her texts are works of the not-quite and not-yet: a disreputable and scandal-chased novel by a major novelist (Witi Ihimaera's *The Trowenna Sea* contains, for Wagner, 'powerful reflections on the Transtasman condition', p. 21); the 'eclectic combination of realism, romance and theatrical modes' (p. 41) that is Ruth Park's *One-a-pecker, Two-a-pecker*; novellas from a writer better known as a poet (Elizabeth Smither); unusual juxtapositions (Robin Hyde and Sue Orr); an author rarely discussed in critical contexts (Roger McDonald); and short texts from authors better known for their novels. The selection feels personal (Wagner offers small glimpses of autobiographical detail throughout the text, to illuminating and rewarding ends) rather than wayward or haphazard. But there is something odd to the whole venture, just as there is to the 'Transtasman' itself, a space between two literary cultures that have little to do with each other, for all of the traffic and interchange of people, goods, families, and fortunes they are built on in extra-literary life. It is Wagner's achievement that she has managed, in this study, both to draw attention to the oddness of this situation and to make it and sustain it as her object of study.

Dougal McNeill, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington