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‘Karl Ricker, Writing Now: Australian Settler Colonial Fiction and Middlebrow Culture in the Twenty-First Century’

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Karl Ricker, *Writing Now: Australian Settler Colonial Fiction and Middlebrow Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2025), 252pp. Hardback. US\$82.95. ISBN 978-1-8037-4443-8.

Around the turn of the century certain Australian bookstores rebranded their General Fiction shelves as 'Literary Fiction,' investing them with an aura of quality and distinctiveness. Karl Ricker cites this concept in the opening to his study, *Writing Now: Australian Settler Colonial Fiction and Middlebrow Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, linking it to other developments in the literary ecology, such as the proliferation of literary prizes and festivals, the rise of celebrity authors, and the emergence of book clubs. Ricker frames these institutions and practices as aspects of a new, twenty-first century iteration of middlebrow culture, which, following Australian scholars David Carter and Beth Driscoll, he argues is a dominant influence in the production and consumption of literature in Australia today. The 'middlebrow' concept indicates a way of reading connected to middle-class ideals of self-improvement, social concern, moral idealism, and cultural capital, and is not simply a (limiting) property of certain texts.

As a reader-oriented approach, middlebrow theory analyses cultural texts in relation to social discourses. Ricker puts it in dialogue with settler colonialism, a framework that emerged in the period under review, and which has transformed socio-cultural analysis of the nation in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and elsewhere. In Australia, crises of national self-understanding caused by the belated recognition of Indigenous ownership of the land, a revisionist history emphasising frontier violence, and revelations of systemic injustice such as the Stolen Generations have motivated writers, publishers, and readers to attempt the novelistic reimagining of national identity and settler subjectivity. But the commercial environment in which literary publishing occurs, and the apparent resilience of settler colonial structures in the face of critique raise questions about the ultimate effects of this writing. Whether new literary visions can compete with, or escape the influence of, long-dominant images and vocabularies is the important critical issue directly and insightfully addressed in *Writing Now*.

Ricker's study is structured around tropes, or figurative devices and motifs that prompt thought or encode deeper meanings. Part One analyses the journey trope in Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) and Stephen Scourfield's *As the River Runs* (2013); Part Two tropes of genealogy in Matthew Condon's *The Trout Opera* (2007), Thomas Keneally's *Two Old Men Dying* (2018), and Gail Jones's *Our Shadows* (2020); and Part Three the trope of mourning in Lia Hills' *The Crying Place* (2017) and Molly Murn's *Heart of the Grass Tree* (2019). Dispensing with Romantic or humanist ideas of the author as creator, Ricker applies Foucault's theory of authorship as function to develop a contemporary settler model of the author as ethical teacher. He evidences this claim through analyses of both paratextual elements and textual strategies. Paratexts such as cover design, quotations from reviewers, author bios, and epigraphs are important initial indices of work and author-figure for potential readers in the commercialised middlebrow domain. Importantly, however, Ricker builds on this with detailed and astute analysis of the narratives, focusing on their imaginative work with tropes that have colonial origins.

The journey trope is stitched into a romance plot in *Journey to the Stone Country* and *As the River Runs*, but the former is more complexly and contingently imagined than the latter's more popular version. In a move common to all three

parts, Ricker argues that the personal stories are metonymic of national discourses of reconciliation. This allegorical dimension is particularly important in *The Trout Opera*, where the genealogical quest is infused with traditional national imagery to reaffirm settler-colonial belonging. *Two Old Men Dying* extends the genealogical trope into remote pre-colonial history, appropriating Mungo Man as the original ancestor of all Australians and imagining his life story alongside that of a contemporary non-Aboriginal protagonist. This humanistic reconciliatory narrative contrasts with the feminist reworking of family history as the vehicle of an alternative national story in *Our Shadows*. The trope of mourning in *Heart of the Grasstree* and *The Crying Place* rests on structural parallels between individual loss in contemporary Australia and earlier episodes of violent dispossession, soliciting an empathetic response from readers to both the non-Indigenous griefs and the repressed history of racial injustice.

Ricker concludes that his chosen novels present counter-narratives that attempt to redress hegemonic settler discourses but ultimately reinscribe white authority. He notes that a study of other tropes might produce different findings, and that Gail Jones and Lia Hills' narrators circumspectly defer to Indigenous authority over cultural knowledge. The subtlety and rigour of its argument throughout makes *Writing Now* an outstanding work of literary and cultural criticism.

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