

Meryl Streep/Clint Eastwood rural film *Bridges of Madison County*, a whole town mobilises to similarly ostracise a woman for life.

There are some welcome exceptions. Christine Anderson's *Burnt Out* on the aftermath of a bushfire, rich in language and metaphor, suggests a writer with more to offer between the personal and the landscape. Anna-Louise Raccanello with *Between Green Walls* solves the problem of nothing much to write about in crushing domesticity with an economical tale covering rape and mental illness.

The *Beach* side of the title is in short supply. No chance to find out if the lush coastal strip held its reputation for hedonism, to contrast the harsh stoicism of the outback?

A regional sense of place alone is not enough to counterbalance the mainly urban definitions of Australian culture. Nor will it act as a bulwark to the tidal wave of UK and US publishing that swamps this country. Unfortunately, these offerings confirm rather than contradict stereotypes about regional writing being akin to community writing. Not because they are down-home and folksy, which they are, but because many are underdeveloped and incidental, even snippets.

The clue is the source. A true survey of undiscovered writers from the far flung regions will require a broader process than all works coming from the Open College of the Arts (OCA) "Starting to Write" course, which QAC

runs. It reeks of writing exercises when you get 2 cat poems, 2 cow poems, a finch, a dog, and other family pets. These are a long way from a Diane Fahey, who transforms critters by her poetic glimpse.

Also, the book lacks notes on contributors. Why do showcases of regional writers or artists commonly omit where they reside, while urban ones live in named cities? Identity is thus massed together as just "regional," disengaging the audience by defining the creators as an amorphous "other."

20

Greg Manning

WHAT BABY BOOMERS DO IN THEIR BEDROOMS

Patrick Buckridge, Pamela Murray, Jock Macleod. *Reading Professional Identities: The Boomers and Their Books*. Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, 1995. ISBN 0 86857 596 8. Available from the publisher, Griffith University, Qld 4111.

Literary academics talk endlessly about what to read and how to read it, but "out there," beyond the canons of academic courses, what do "ordinary passionate readers"

actually read, and why? This is a fascinating question, both compelling and unanswerable, full of traps and pitfalls. It is also a question which has seldom been explored in an Australian context.

This short (43pp), self-effacing report details the results of a two-part survey of the reading habits and practices of 26 Australian professionals born between 1945 and 1955, the so-called "baby boomer generation." Participants included teachers and lawyers, scientists and engineers, corporate managers and librarians — as good a smattering of the professional profile of the generation as a group of 26 could provide. All of them identified themselves as "readers," but anyone who had read a tertiary literature course was ineligible to participate.

After a short survey of the relevant literature, this excellently organised monograph introduces the participants in terms of their profession, class background, gender, schooling and religion. Race, interestingly, is omitted, which may reflect the relative racial homogeneity of Australia 1945–55, but I suspect is more likely a consequence of one of the survey's vulnerable points — the fact that the participants came "mainly through [the investigators'] personal acquaintance networks." They are all people who know Australian literary and cultural studies academics, or their friends or family.

Interestingly, the participants expressed very little interest in religion, and

this seemed to me to come through at times in their readings. (Is an impatience with metaphor a mark of the secular imagination? I suspect it may be.) Only one participant identified herself with an organised religious institution, a proportion which I suspect would be vastly lower than the general population, lower even than the general professional population (but perhaps close to the figure for fortysomething leftist academics and acquaintances).

The participants were interviewed twice, once in terms of their personal backgrounds and their general attitudes to reading, and a second time to test their responses to three set texts, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Peter Corris's "Escort to an Easy Death" (a story from *Heroin Annie*), and Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*.

In the general interview, the respondents drew a firm distinction between reading for information (professional reading and other non-fiction), and reading for pleasure (fiction, sometimes poetry). They rarely thought of reading for both at once. "Pleasure," however, meant different things to different people: to some it was associated with "aesthetic pleasure," the satisfactions of fine writing and complex characterisation, while to others it meant "entertainment" or "escape." This distinction linked in turn with readers' sense of the importance of their reading to their personal and professional lives: where "aesthetic" readers saw connections between their reading and their broader lives, readers who

sought entertainment tended to deny, or to resist such links. That much is perhaps predictable — what is less so is the fact that these distinctions overrode professional differentia. There were approximately equal numbers of “aestheticists” and “escapists” on either side of the science/humanities divide. Readers’ readiness to connect their reading to their lives had much more to do with what and how they read than with what they did for a living. Expressed thus, the proposition suddenly seems commonsensical, but I suspect that it runs against conventional expectation, and it would be good to see it tested against a larger sample.

Respondents in the first interview also manifested some discomfort with the term “literature,” which the authors suggest may have been caused by the fact that these people read for pleasure, and whereas books are fun, “literature” means work. That may be so — but the respondents’ discomfort may have derived in part from the peculiar dynamics of the interview situation, a problem which cropped up again in the reports on the second series of interviews.

Here the respondents discussed the three texts they had been asked to read — one a classic, canonical instance of European High Modernism; the second a bit of genre fiction, a short detective story in the hardboiled mode; and the third a highly regarded recent Australian novella. All the respondents recognised that Kafka was (supposed to

be?) Great Literature, though not all of them enjoyed it; none of them put Peter Corris at the top of the quality tree (but five of them liked it best); the Garner, which was both “straight-forward” and “quality,” was the most popular, with a vote of 10 out of 22.

Then the respondents were asked whether they found each story “realistic” or not, and what they understood by the term “realism.” Their answers are less interesting to me than the investigators’ closing comments on this section:

Realism, in short, emerges as an important and complex term in non-academic literary discourse, and its multiple functions, both rhetorical and analytical, seemed to invite further attention.

Perhaps it does “emerge” in this way, if you put it into the “discourse” in the first place. Bear in mind that the respondents were asked whether or not they found each story “realistic” — the term came from the questioners, not from the respondents. Perhaps because I am writing this review between first-year tutorials, I am struck by the way this group of alleged “non-academics” has, by the end of the second interview, come to resemble a large, bright tutorial class. They have completed their set reading (bliss!), which they then discuss with the tutor (a figure they know, and have known for some time, from their personal acquaintance network, to be a qualified literary academic), and now they are struggling with

questions concerning the relations between a standard academic term (realism) and their set reading. I do much the same thing with my students. Thus, by the end of the second round of interviews, the structure of the investigation and the nature of the investigative discourse has significantly displaced the "innocent" objects of its initial interest in the direction of the more familiar, tutored figures of academic literary utterance.

The dilemma echoes the tragedy of the anthropologist, of which Derrida has written:

It is the anthropologist who violates a virginal space so accurately connoted by the scene of a game and a game played by little girls. The mere presence of the foreigner, the mere fact of his having his eyes open, cannot not provoke a violation: the *aside*, the secret murmured in the ear, the successive movements of the "stratagem" ...

The mere presence of the spectator, then, is a violation.

(Of Grammatology 113)

To say as much is not to criticise, certainly not to dismiss, this admirable monograph. But it is to point to the intensity and the complexity of the difficulties which confront academic surveyors when they attempt to interview a group of "non-academic" (ie "innocent") readers. The moment the first interview turns towards the subject matter is the moment that this

"innocence" is first threatened, as it must be. It is precisely the name and (therefore) the nature of the subject matter, the possibility of a right name for whatever "books"/"novels"/"literature" is trying to signify, which is the point at issue. Its settlement is the condition of possibility for a survey of this order, but necessity does not guarantee the possibility of its settlement.

Perhaps that is why the respondents are so uncomfortable when they are asked by professional literary academics for their opinions about "literature." Perhaps they are trying, politely, to express their difference from objects of academic perception when, right from the start, they keep saying that they prefer not to talk about their reading, that they think of it as belonging to their own private space, that precious half hour in bed before sleep. Occasionally they may choose to share that space with a loved one or a close friend, but not, one suspects, with an academic investigator (not with any great "naturalness," anyway).

Is it possible, ever, to make one's way towards that space? To come to understand it? How far should academics go into the privacy of the bedroom? That is a question, and a challenge, this intriguing and stimulating study leaves to its successors.

20