

how a writer can, no matter how good he is, expect to entertain and stimulate his readers over 480-odd pages on such triviality.

And perhaps this is why the slap and tickle scenes are there for — to spice up an otherwise tedious plot. *The Slap* is Tsiolkas's first attempt to give pre-eminence to warts-and-all depictions of straight sex when most of his previous novels were an exploration of gay sexuality. But it does not sound right. One jarring note among others is that Tsiolkas has projected the pervasive male cannibalistic fantasies in *Dead Europe* onto a female character in *The Slap* and imagines straight sex to be animalistic. When Anouk and Rhys engage in sexual intercourse, Tsiolkas writes: "She wanted to bite him, scratch him, devour him. Fuck me, she ordered him sharply now, and she wondered, is this how a man understands sex? This ravenous animal desire?" (60).

Christos Tsiolkas has so far lived up to his reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of Australian fiction — an *enfant terrible* who probably got a slap on the wrist when he realised his heretical subject matter prevented him from winning any major prize such as the Miles Franklin Award. To be able to write *The Slap* — a novel expunged from same-sex depictions, exposed anti-Semitic ideas, sexual deviances such as zoophilia or coprophilia, nihilism, and so many other confronting and repelling subjects — Tsiolkas has

bleached his dirty realism through a process I would call "ethical cleansing." And, amazingly, it has paid off since this Melbourne-based author has won the first major prize in his literary career: i.e. the 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. However, this achievement might be seen as a Pyrrhic victory because this toned down novel has alas neither the freshness and sprightliness of *Loaded* nor the complexity and ambitiousness of *Dead Europe*. To all intents and purposes, *The Slap* ends up robbing readers to pay Christos, but if it takes this sacrifice to acknowledge — even belatedly — the novelist's writing skills, readers can always slap the book on the table and eagerly wait for the next one.



*Marie Ramsland*

## A PANORAMIC SURVEY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

Jean-François Vernay. *Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours 1831–2007*. Paris: Hermann, 2009. ISBN 978 2 7056 6803 7. RRP: 25 Euros. pp.250.

This concise volume of 250 pages provides a wealth of valuable

information for anyone interested in Australian literature, culture, and history.

Once again, its author, Jean-François Vernay, has made a considerable contribution to Australian literary and cultural studies, which is “timely, thorough and generally persuasive,”<sup>1</sup> with this broad, sweeping survey of the colonial and post-colonial Australian novel. His study is based on substantial scholarship and research delving into a broad selection of novels, and resulting in an encyclopaedic but insightful summary of the history of the genre, its trends and themes, its authors and their works.

Written for a French audience to inform them of the untapped richness of Australian writing, which up until now has only been hinted at by the French publications of a select few, the book is both scholarly and didactic in nature. Vernay says that the idea for such a publication came from people constantly asking whom they should read to become familiar with Australian literature. The answers he gives reflect his own personal preferences. “If I could come up with a work where everything is on display then the reader would be in a better position to make their own choices.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, the book is not exhaustive in its choice of authors and novels, but it does cover the major movements and changes of the genre from early colonial times to the present. And some of the writers chosen have now been unjustly forgotten.

As the title of the book suggests, the author has chosen an innovative cinematic structure for his work. At the outset, the *Trailer* informs us of the reasons for choosing to present the study chronologically according to the main historical periods, and for presenting a lengthy “cinematic essay” from the book’s beginning to its end, punctuated with three types of inserts (or enclosures): *Close-ups* of an author or a book; *Low angle shots* for the “greats”— novels and/or authors; and *Panoramic views* that treat themes or the career of specific writers. There are thirty-five inserts that can be read independently from, or in conjunction with, the essay where they provide further information and make generalisations of the specific subject treated in each.

The first of the inserts is a low-angle shot of the celebrated novel by Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Vernay gives a succinct summary of the plot and notes the representative status *par excellence* it has in penal literature that portrays the harsh life of English convicts transported to the other side of the world to serve out their punishment for crimes committed in the Motherland. The fictional protagonist, Rufus Dawes, was meant to be “the embodiment of humanistic convictions held by [Clarke] who thought that mankind could survive independently from the Divine.” And we discover that when it first appeared in serial form, the ending was less tragic than that of the published novel a couple of years later in 1874.

There is a panoramic view of Miles Franklin that gives details of her birth and writing achievements. The Miles Franklin Prize — Australia's most prestigious, sometimes controversial, literary award — was set up from money she left for that purpose. Its first recipient was “a man flayed alive” by his own countrymen, Patrick White who used his Nobel Prize money to establish a prize that recognises writers whose quality work goes unrecognised in their lifetime. “We can see here,” Vernay adds, “a wink to Miles Franklin...” (There is also a low-angle shot of the Award and a panoramic view of White.)

A recent writer shortlisted for this year's Miles Franklin, Christos Tsioklas warrants a close-up entry for his contribution to modern literature. He “is known as the *‘enfant terrible’* of Australian literature” for the subjects he treats in his works. And there is also a close-up of Tsioklas's work *Loaded* (the final insert) that is, along with two subsequent works, an introspective study of homosexuality as part of the human condition.

The film metaphor continues throughout the text with six chapters as the major sequences in the narrated evolution of the genre. These are followed by an epilogue, a documentary essay and various appendices as *Bonus* items (as often offered in DVD productions), such as a bibliography and an index (the cinematic *Credits*).

Vernay begins his Prologue with the question: “So what is Australian literature?” and successive questions follow. These are questions that are used to direct an investigation into the nature of Australian literature — if indeed there is such a thing. To these questions, he does not hesitate to supply his own answers. He then expands these points by discussing in explanatory mode ten defining characteristics. For example, under the theme of *Isolation*, he writes:

... there exists in Australia what can be called the Southern Hemisphere complex ... detected in particular in language where according to a popular vulgar expression some are not ashamed to describe their country as being “the arsehole of the world”. Using more moderate language, Thomas Keneally ... situates Australia ... at “the world's worst end.”

A conversational style marks this book from the start. Like a silver screen narrator, Vernay speaks directly to the reader — the “I” soon becomes “we.” And this seemingly casual approach continues in the Prologue and onwards, in a free-flowing narrative that is not just concerned with giving cold, hard disjointed facts (although facts there are), but with involving the reader intellectually — and emotionally. One can imagine the reader as part of an audience in a darkened cinema absorbed in exciting action on the silver screen. The French critic, Sylviane Soulard, goes so far as to

write that *Panorama* reads “like a novel.”<sup>3</sup> Vernay himself has stated that he wanted to avoid using critical jargon and to create a work that would appeal, “surprise” and awaken a desire in the reader to read Australian books — clearly a didactic purpose. However, literary terminology and the occasional obscure phrase do crop up (a natural tendency for any scholar or expert in their field), causing the reader to search a little deeper for the intended meaning. For example, there is Brian Castro who “even goes as far as to scoff at psychoanalysis in his way by devising language games about associated ideas with the use of collocation and paronomasia.” To highlight his personal perspective, Vernay peppers his essay with his own imaginative turn of phrase or image, often with a touch of humour. In speaking of Colin Johnson’s contribution to Australian literature, he writes:

It is true that Johnson’s writing can be read as a remedy against the suffering of the Aborigines and the spread of Western evils. By putting together the pieces, Johnson acts as a healing shaman. Because *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription For Enduring The Ending of The World* belongs to political literature, this novel — in spite of Colin Johnson’s usurped identity — is not as much use as a poultice on a wooden leg.

The analysis of the evolution of the Australian novel is presented in six chapters covering six

different chronological periods. Interconnections are made between the country’s history and its development into a nation and these six major stages in the creative output of its novelists. Each stage is expounded concisely and effectively. Convict literature and colonial romance writing began with the “first” Australian novel, *Quintus Servinton* (1832) that denounced “an emerging society based on a system of bondage and controlled by an imperial power.” In this section, Vernay unearths the early works, recognised or not, in Australia’s literary history written by men and women alike. Women writers return in force in the 1970s with the “feminisation of the novel” and sexual liberation. Bush mythology, the adventure novel, and “writing realism which rhymes with nationalism,” indicates the beginnings of a national conscience; historical and political novels; war novels, popular writing and realism supplanted by modernism; aspects of literary multiculturalism that add to the richness and breadth of Australian literature; and postmodernist novels and new approaches to literary creation. There was also the affirmation of the Aboriginal novel in this period of renewal and fruitful creativity begun the 1980s. Two waves of expatriation amongst writers are dealt with. Hoaxes, debates, debacles, conflicts, dilemmas, identity litigation, political issues, national and international recognition, parallel literature are among the many issues covered in this book.

As this text ably demonstrates, Australian literature is varied and prolific — treating universal themes as well as specifically Australian ones. While Vernay concentrates on the literary genre most popular with readers, publishers and filmmakers — the novel — since he considers it best in revealing the emergence and development of what is considered “Australian literature,” references are made to other literary genres (such as poetry, the short story, memoir and so on) and cinema when appropriate.

The author has also succeeded in finding a “new prism” or “another vision” to discuss works by many of the writers he deals with. His interests are many, especially psychoanalysis, philosophy, contemporary literary theory, and the relationship between fictional content and contemporary life. This is obvious from the well-structured and lengthy Chapter 6 that deals with the resurgence and variety of literary output from the 1980s to the present. The reader is made aware of the author’s personal attitude throughout, but this in no way detracts from the overall impact of the central thesis presented that unites the various sections of the book. Vernay draws all the themes together succinctly in his Epilogue.

The documentary essay entitled *L'essor et le sort de l'édition* presents a concise overview of the trends in publishing in Australia up to the

present with a clear explanation of the way in which publishing has changed and now operates. It points out that even highly talented authors find it increasingly difficult to get their works accepted by the top Australian publishing houses and resort to self-publishing. This is seen as a blight on how literature is currently perceived in Australia.

An artist’s life is not a long tranquil river. Far from it! (Trailer)

With a Masters’ thesis on Peter Carey, a doctorate analysing the work of Christopher Koch and several articles published in academic journals, Jean-François Vernay has devoted himself for more than ten years to Australian contemporary literature and culture. As an experienced teacher of English to senior high school students in Noumea, he has had the opportunity to introduce them to Australian literature and registered their reactions.

As the founding editor of an innovative interdisciplinary New Caledonian journal, *Correspondances Océaniennes*, he ensured that some aspect of Australian culture — be it art, literature, history, Aboriginal issues, film, politics, and so on — was a feature in each edition. *Panorama* is an ambitious, even daring undertaking. And, despite some infelicities in the text, it is one that succeeds in its aim as expressed by the author — a devoted scholar of Australian literature. With *Panorama*

*du roman australien*, Jean-François Vernay has demonstrated with the novel genre that Australian literature cannot and should not be minimised and deserves its rightful place on the international literary scene.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Review of Vernay's *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch*, Cambria Press, 2007, by Paul Genoni, *Australian Literary Studies* 23: 4, October 2008, 493–6.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Caterson, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/books/french-take-on-the-australian-novel/2009/02/13/1234028266764.html>>, accessed 21.6.2009.

<sup>3</sup> Sylviane Soulard, 'Parution de *Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours* de Jean-François Vernay', *Episodes Nouvelle Calédonie*, p.57.



Tony Simoes da Silva

### BORDER CROSSING

Kim Cheng Boey. *Between Stations*. Sydney: Giramondo, 2009. ISBN 9781920882501. RRP \$27.99. pp.313 + Glossary and Sources.

Kim Cheng Boey is a Singapore-born poet, essayist, and academic currently teaching at the University of Newcastle and *Between Stations* brings into play all these facets of his self. A collection of eleven essays united by a focus on travel, dislocation, and identity, *Between Stations* offers a complex meditation on family and memory, place and placelessness. At its core is a year-long journey that will clarify for Boey whether the decision to leave his homeland, Singapore, for a new life in Australia is the right one. As he writes, coincidentally halfway through the book, "[t]hree months into this yearlong trip, I am waiting for signs to tell me if my decision to emigrate is right" (159). Echoing concerns explored in another well-known work focused on the Chinese diaspora, Clara Law's *A Floating Life* (1996), Boey is torn between the desire to leave Singapore for personal reasons and "the Confucian values ... [that] argue against leaving" behind parents and siblings and failing to discharge correct cultural and familial duties. For the past he leaves behind is more than a place or a culture; it is above all a self formed in densely textured and often painful relationships with family, friends, and even complete strangers.

*Between Stations* is dominated by the parallel realities of loss and possibility, a life already lived and one yet to unravel. These constitute the central themes of a book that is otherwise a series of fragments of more or less focused memories that account in large part also for the