
*Real Relations* argues that the last couple of decades of feminist criticism has fashioned a preference for women’s writing that is experimental and innovative in form. In that process, Lever argues, women’s realist writing and fiction written by men have been neglected as potentially rich subjects of feminist literary criticism. A such, Lever’s book seeks to address this neglect by offering feminist readings of both areas.

At this point I have some confessions to make: my book, *Jamming the Machinery*, is one of the texts Lever cites as privileging experiment and innovation in feminist readings of Australian women’s writing; it is also published in the same series as this one; and Susan Lever was its editor. While this set of real relations complicates my position as reviewer, I think it clearly shows Lever’s intellectual openness if she can edit a book that goes against the grain of the one she is writing, so I’m aiming for the same spirit in reviewing.

Engaging with the politics of form, Lever argues that realist writers do not employ the conventions of their genre in any simple way that unproblematically replicates their traditional patriarchal values. Rather, she argues, each writer always negotiates the generic limitations of form, and close reading can identify such subversions, troublings, negotiations, and the social values implicated. As she concludes,

> Obviously, the formal structure of a text may be revealing, particularly about its relationships to the historical context of its writing. But these assumptions about genre—that the “classical realist” text is liberal, the autobiographical text “bourgeois individualist,” the “avante-garde” text politically radical and so on—curtail the reading process and deny the mixed nature of the novel, in particular. In the case of women’s writing, the tendency to categorise any realist fiction as “liberal feminism” and any experimental fiction as “radical” denies the complexity of the negotiation in individual texts. (146)

Lever’s argument about the potentially rich depths of irony and subversion to be located within the realist form is skilfully wound through the collection and convincingly draws on a broad and prominent tradition of “Australian literature.” Operating chronologically, Lever reads a large number of now canonical women writers, interspersed with four “interludes”
which read canonical men’s writing—male writers who have often been accused of misogyny and sexism, Lever argues, but who offer pertinent chronological comparisons with women writers of their time. These chapters are designed to build upon each other like a series of interlinked scenes which contribute to a particular narrative of Australian literature. As such, this text is highly accessible and will be extremely useful for students.

Reading “across the grain,” Real Relations begins with a close reading of two of Ada Cambridge’s texts in relation to the woman question and white women’s suffrage at the turn of the century. The first “interlude” sets alongside Cambridge her almost exact contemporary, Joseph Furphy, and his literary treatment of the “authoress” and the limitations of gender and genre in Such is Life. Lever then turns to Henry Handel Richardson’s Maurice Guest examining its relation to conventions of the romance genre; to Katharine Susannah Pritchard’s Coonardoo through a poststructural interest in language and culture; and then to Vance Palmer’s The Passage as formally uncertain of its insistent masculinity. Several of Christina Stead’s novels are read through their historico-political commitments, while Patrick White’s The Twyborn Affair is shown to challenge constructs of Australian masculinity and to be linked with the Lacanian Imaginary.

Reaching the 1970s and second wave feminism, Lever argues for the value of public writing, using as examples the highly personalised narratives of Garner’s Monkey Grip and Morgan’s My Place. Following this duo, Lever examines David Foster’s Males from Mars and Sam Watson’s The Kadaitcha Song as “complementary” explorations of masculine violence. Finally, contemporary women’s writing from the 1980s is discussed in their intersection of feminist and postmodern theories. To this cause, Marion Campbell’s Lines of Flight, Finola Moorhead’s Remember the Tarantella, Mary Fallon’s Working Hot and Drusilla Modjeska’s Poppy are read for their contributions to finding ways of representing the lives of women. This chapter seems to stretch the definitions of what might constitute “realism,” in its relation to representing “the real,” and its chosen texts seem emblematic of that experimentation and innovation in form to which this book initially responds in protest.

As a book of feminist literary criticism, this book reminds me of some of the initial impulses of the feminist movement in its reading of images of women in men’s texts, and its act of retrieval of previously neglected (realist) texts by women. As a feminist literary critic Lever
seems to position herself as both insider and outsider, providing her own feminist readings in the liberal tradition of inclusivity, while identifying the impact of trends of feminist literary criticism upon the field of Australian Literature, a field in which she is clearly immersed. It is in the scholarship and historical detail of reading Australian Literature that Lever is most intimate, and at times her knowledge and evident love of Ozlit seems threatened by the impulses of feminism. I once read that the French feminist Hélène Cixous turned up at a conference wearing bright pink stilettos: if this caricatures trendy continental feminist theory for Lever, then I imagine the tradition of Australian Literature as being Dr Scholes sandals: just a bit old-fashioned now but such a close and comfortable fit to your foot and so easy and solid to walk in that they're like an old friend. I can imagine Lever clearly preferring her Dr Scholes, but sometimes breaking out into some risky post-structural stilettos when the time is right. In her book, both modess have their place.

Susan Lever’s *Real Relations* is the fourth in the ASAL Literary Studies series, now published, for the first time, by Halstead Press. As an initiative of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, this series began in response to the increasing scarcity of specialist writing about Australia, and has provided a valuable opportunity for critics, including myself, to publish on Australian literature. Susan Lever was one of the foundation members of the editorial committee (along with Robert Dixon and Delys Bird) and a driving force in seeing the series come to fruition. Her latest contribution to the series is to be welcomed and marks a valuable addition to the tradition of Australian literary criticism.

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**Michelle Taylor**

**ENLIVENING THE MUDFLATS OF HISTORY**

*Blackfellas Whitefellas Wetlands* (Poetry and music from Boondall Wetlands)
Poets: B.R. Dionysius, Liz Hall-Downs, Samuel Wagan Watson
CD produced by Brisbane City Council, 1999. R.R.P. $16.95

When I was learning social studies at primary school I wish there had been a project like *Blackfellas Whitefellas Wetlands*. Begun in 1996 with the support of the Brisbane City Council and the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities, it brought together poets, historians, musicians, photographers and visual