

What is Australian Popular Fiction?

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AUSTRALIAN popular fiction is the most significant growth area in Australian trade publishing since the turn of the twenty-first century, yet it has received little sustained scholarly attention (Fletcher et al. 5). Over the last two decades, the rhetoric of the decline of literary fiction has become a recurring theme in cultural journalism (see, for example, Knox; Mordue; Neill; Sullivan; Williamson). But while the fate of literature prompts elegiac reflection, Australian popular fiction is a success story hidden in plain view. Nationally and internationally, critically and commercially, Australian popular fiction titles have performed strongly over the twenty-first century. For example, in 2010 Peter Temple's *Truth* won Australia's most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin, following German, Swedish, US, and UK prizes for this and his earlier novels; in 2015 Australian fantasy writer Angela Slatter won a World Fantasy Award for her short story collection, *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings*; and in 2017 romance novelist Stephanie Laurens appeared on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for the 38th time with *Lord of the Privateers*. As we have shown elsewhere, the three major genres of crime, fantasy and romance are not just growing by output, but driving change in the post-digital publishing economy (Driscoll et al., 'Publishing Ecosystems'). This special issue is part of our larger research agenda to address the gaps in knowledge about this thriving sector of literary culture, both in Australia and internationally.

This brief introductory essay serves two purposes. The first is to introduce the study of contemporary Australian popular fiction with reference to our wider research on 'genre worlds'. Using a literary sociological approach that draws on Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds*, our research recognises the multi-

ple dimensionality of popular genres: as bodies of texts, collections of social formations that gather around and produce those texts, and sets of industrial practices with various national and transnational orientations. It is those national and transnational orientations that we pick up in this introduction, which discusses the Australianness of Australian popular fiction. How useful is a concept of ‘Australian popular fiction’, when the settings and circulation of novels authored and/or published here are so often located elsewhere? It seems to us appropriate to address this question in *Australian Literary Studies*, a journal that continues to be a primary site for the consideration of Australian literary culture and its international connections. The second purpose of this essay is to introduce a themed cluster of four essays by Australian researchers, each of whom looks to both Australia and the world for examples of the cultural and commercial functions that contemporary popular fiction can perform.

In considering the Australianness of Australian popular fiction, we respond to Ken Gelder’s call for scholars to take seriously the intellectual challenge that popular fiction, with its distinctive industrial processes and transnational mobility, poses to the category of Australian literature (114). Gelder argues that there is a typical alignment of popular fiction with homogenising globalisation, and of literature with the local; accordingly, ‘[t]he placement of a localised literary realism at the heart of the Australian canon ensured the marginalisation of transnational popular fiction’ (115). Our research contributes to the troubling of this binary and the cementing of popular fiction in the sphere of Australian literary studies. Popular fiction is an ideal research object for testing the transnational connections of Australian books. For example, contemporary fantasy fiction is written and read by Australians, but the genre’s conventional mediaeval settings and European concerns mean that it rarely depicts Australian people or places: ‘Australian fantasy fiction therefore *is* Australian literature and yet somehow *is not* Australian literature at the same time’ (Wilkins 265, original emphasis). The ‘is and is not’ Australianness of popular fiction applies – with varying intensity – across contemporary Australian fantasy, crime and romance. Consider the work of Perth-based author Anna Hackett, whose action romances include works set in space or featuring US Navy SEALs; or Michael Robotham, a former president of the Australian Crime Writers Association, whose work is often set in the UK or the US, has always been published by Penguin UK and whose biggest market is in Germany.

The working definition with which we commenced our research on Australian ‘genre worlds’ – books written by Australian authors – breaks down into a series of hard-to-reconcile incongruities. Rather than generating a definition so exclusive or so capacious as to be meaningless, we have decided to let the ambiguity stand: it is very hard to define Australian popular fiction precisely, because Aus-

tralian popular fiction is traversed by a range of textual, social and industrial influences that are not always national. One way of approaching these questions is to include the opinions and experiences of those with a very direct stake in Australian popular fiction: writers and publishing industry professionals. Our project has used semi-structured interviews to gather over one hundred hours of first-hand knowledge about Australian popular fiction. Our conversations range across many topics, but regularly return to how Australian writers and books are defined, and what it means to write Australian settings. Our interviewees include writers who were born in Australia, writers who were born abroad, agents and editors from other countries who work with Australian writers, and writers whose largest readerships are in the United States or other territories. While they express diverse attitudes about Australianness as it relates to popular fiction, there are also important similarities around what might constitute Australian authorial identity and a distinctive Australian voice, how Australian settings are connected to that voice, and how a lack of national distinctiveness might be tied to the potential success of genre fiction in international markets.

Australian Authorial Identity and Voice

We asked every writer we interviewed if they consider themselves an ‘Australian writer’, and most did, displaying varying levels of national pride. Some authors were unequivocal one way or another. On the one hand, crime writer Kerry Greenwood responded to the question with a definite ‘I am, I am, yes’, linking Australian authorship to the settings of her stories: ‘damn it, I want it [the story] to be here . . . I want the Australianness of it’.¹ On the other hand, romance writer Stephanie Laurens responded with a definite, ‘Not at all. I think of myself as an author’.² Along this spectrum of responses, the majority identify as and enjoy being Australian writers, but describe their work as not necessarily Australian in an immediately recognisable way. That is, even writers who identify as ‘Australian’ are very aware of the mismatch between their national identity and the work they produce.

Fantasy writer Kate Forsyth, for example, identifies strongly as an Australian author, and proudly relates that one of her ancestors was Australia’s first-published children’s writer Charlotte Waring Atkinson. But she also sees herself as a ‘global citizen’, and only one of her 40 books is set in Australia.³ Similarly, fantasy writer Cecilia Dart-Thornton speaks lovingly of Australia and says she ‘certainly identifies as Australian’, but in terms of her career, ‘I identify as

¹Greenwood, Kerry. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2017.

²Laurens, Stephanie. Personal interview. 4 Sep. 2017.

³Forsyth, Kate. Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2017.

a writer of the world, of planet Earth'.⁴ From writers who create fantastic worlds, we might expect an attachment beyond the national. But other popular fiction writers echo this sentiment. Romance writer Stefanie London explains, 'I would classify myself as an international author. I am Australian and I write Australian romances but I definitely write other things too'.⁵ Fellow romance writer Kelly Hunter makes a similar point: 'even though I don't always write Australian settings . . . [m]y underlying perspective is that of an Australian person'.⁶ In all these quotations, we see little evidence that writers feel they must choose between a national and international outlook. That kind of tension only arises when writers engage with large national institutions: crime writer Angela Savage tells of applying for an Australia Council grant and wondering, 'can I even call myself an Australian writer? I've never set a book . . . in Australia'.⁷ The global outlook that leads writers to write about anywhere in the world is, in the case of competitive funding, revealed as a potential compromise of Australian identity.

The sheer cultural force of London and New York as Anglophone publishing centres – what Pascale Casanova calls the 'irremediable and violent discontinuity between the metropolitan literary world and its suburban outskirts' (43) – mitigates against the inclusion of Australian content in popular fiction. However, First Nations writer Claire G. Coleman sees this triangulation of Australia against big Anglophone markets as a potential area for distinctiveness: 'I think Australian writers are tackling a different paradigm to any other in the world. So people think of us as a colony of Britain or they think of us as a bit like America, but Australia's not like anyone else and Australian writers therefore have a different way of looking at everything'.⁸ The idea of a 'different way of looking' connects to Hunter's point above about an 'underlying perspective' that is distinctively Australian. This distinctiveness is raised by many of our interview respondents.

Given the diversity of genres and settings of Australian popular fiction works, surprisingly similar answers emerged from our interviews about what constitutes an Australian voice or attitude in popular fiction: egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, humour and casual language are chief among the traits cited. Romance writer Bec Sampson argues that Australians have an egalitarian impulse that is visible even in texts intended for international markets: 'we don't

⁴Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. Personal interview. 3 June 2017.

⁵London, Stefanie. Personal interview. 29 July 2017.

⁶Hunter, Kelly. Personal interview. 4 Sep. 2017.

⁷Savage, Angela. Personal interview. 1 Dec. 2017.

⁸Coleman, Claire G. Personal interview. 14 May 2018.

necessarily have an attitude about where people start out' and are comfortable with 'people changing their circumstances'.⁹ Romantic suspense writer Bronwyn Parry agrees that Australians have 'always had this strong suspicion of authority',¹⁰ while the Executive Producer of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* Fiona Eagger sees Kerry Greenwood's work as 'absolutely' distinctively Australian in that 'it's so anti-authoritarian'.¹¹ Crime writer Sulari Gentill suggests 'we're less concerned with taboos',¹² while Canadian-Australian fantasy writer Lisa L. Hannett notes 'a preoccupation with stories with outsiders' as an enduring thematic concern of Australian popular fiction.¹³

This perceived suspicion of rules, conformity and authority makes Australian popular fiction 'really fresh', says Robyn Enlund, fellow writer and friend of paranormal romance writer Keri Arthur; Enlund argues that Arthur writes in a way that's 'so uniquely Australian and so blunt and forthright'.¹⁴ Australian publisher Angela Meyer compliments Australian crime writers as distinctively 'bold' in their depictions of the negative aspects of life; not in the sense of representing the abject, but in the sense of representing 'deeply' the 'really horrible ways that people can be and their inner thoughts and their motivations'.¹⁵ This boldness and bluntness is complemented by a sense of humour: Gentill particularly appreciates the way that Australian writers might employ humour at dark moments in the narrative. Fantasy author Sean Williams has deliberately written Australian in-jokes into the licensed novels he writes for LucasArts in the *Star Wars* universe. He wrote the musical comedy trio Tripod into a *Star Wars* novel, and when they discovered they had been immortalised this way, they responded by writing a song about it.¹⁶

Beyond the 'casualness' of the Australian attitude, as Bec Sampson calls it,¹⁷ other writers identify Australianness at the level of language. For Harlequin Mills & Boon editor Flo Nicoll, 'the Australian voice is infused with . . . language choices', especially in stories set in Australia.¹⁸ Freelance editor Lachlan Jobbins agrees that the Australian authors he has worked with are distinctively

⁹Sampson, Bec. Personal interview. 3 Nov. 2017.

¹⁰Parry, Bronwyn. Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2015.

¹¹Eagger, Fiona. Personal interview. 5 May 2017.

¹²Gentill, Sulari. Personal interview. 6 Feb. 2018.

¹³Hannett, Lisa L. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2017.

¹⁴Enlund, Robyn. Personal interview. 1 July 2017.

¹⁵Meyer, Angela. Personal interview. 28 July 2017.

¹⁶Williams, Sean. Personal communication. 12 Nov. 2018.

¹⁷Sampson, Bec. Personal interview. 3 Nov. 2017.

¹⁸Nicoll, Flo. Personal interview. 29 July 2017.

Australian in their ‘language’ as much as their setting.¹⁹ Hannett, in describing Angela Slatter’s urban fantasy *Vigil*, also points to the language as a key factor: ‘the quips and the kind of slang and just natural things that the characters are talking about . . . have a real Australian feel.’²⁰

This Australian voice extends to characterisation, not just through dialogue, but in the kinds of characters that Australian popular fiction repeatedly deploys. Romance writer Anna Campbell suggests an Australian attitude is apparent in Australian romance fiction in strongly drawn and mature female characters: ‘I think there’s an innate strength that you get’ in ‘Australian heroines’.²¹ Parry explains that traditionally, many of Australia’s female heroes have been athletic champions such as Dawn Fraser and Cathy Freeman, and so we are acculturated to admiring ‘independence and strength . . . particularly in our heroines’.²² Eagger sees Greenwood’s development of Phryne Fisher, ‘with her social conscience and sticking up for the underdog’ as an example of an Australian character not constrained by ‘the confines of class’, ‘a freedom about her which is, I think, particularly Australian’.²³ Literary agent Haylee Nash perceives a link between setting and Australian characterisation: Australian rural work, she argues, is ‘key to Australian cultural identity’ and this may manifest in characters; it is a particular boon in romance fiction, which hosts a large cast of ‘rough and tough bloke[s]’.²⁴ As Parry points out, the Australian landscape is particularly ‘challenging’ and has formed the backbone of our white mythology of hardship and characters who overcome it: ‘the Man from Snowy River, the farmer battler, the drought’.²⁵ But settings in Australian popular fiction are not always Australian. The choice to use or not use Australian settings affords a different range of opportunities for a novel’s success.

Australian Settings in International Genre Markets

It is impossible to ignore the sustained popularity of Australian rural romance – that is, romance fiction set in non-urban locations, ‘where the love story unfolds amidst the concerns of the agricultural and small town experience’ (Driscoll et al., ‘Women’ 75). Nash suggests that the ‘celebration of Australian settings’ in rural romance encourages certain story ideas, for example, ‘man versus nature’ or ‘city girl goes to the country’, which are enduring ideas ‘all

¹⁹Jobbins, Lachlan. Personal interview. 7 June 2017.

²⁰Hannett, Lisa L. Personal interview. 10 Apr. 2017.

²¹Campbell, Anna. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2017.

²²Parry, Bronwyn. Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2015.

²³Eagger, Fiona. Personal interview. 5 May 2017.

²⁴Nash, Haylee. Personal interview. 7 June 2017.

²⁵Parry, Bronwyn. Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2015.

over the world'.²⁶ While Nash speaks here of the value of Australian settings for stories, Penguin Random House publisher Beverly Cousins sees Australian-set popular fiction as an important contribution to Australian literary culture. Because many people read commercial fiction, 'we can get that culture out to Australian readers rather than them having to just soak up the cultures from abroad'. Literary agent Selwa Anthony agrees, and is a strong believer in representing Australian settings for Australian readers. Whether those settings are as widely disseminated internationally is another question. Cousins points out that 'Germany loves it'²⁷; Anthony agrees, noting that she has 'had a lot of luck in Germany', where her sub-agent seeks books with 'an Australian landscape and a romantic element'. However, Anthony also suggests it is 'extremely uncommon' for Australian books with Australian settings to circulate globally, citing Judy Nunn and Di Morrissey as bestselling authors in Australia who use Australian settings, but have comparatively low profiles internationally.²⁸

The demands, or indeed indifference, of other markets are important considerations for writers and publishers of Australian popular fiction. Some authors may work with successful conventions from international genre texts to produce Australian variants. For example, Candice Fox deliberately set *Crimson Lake* near Cairns, not to have an Australian setting necessarily, but to seek the 'Louisiana swamps feel' of HBO television series *True Detective*.²⁹ However, the conventions of some genres may not be adaptable to an Australian setting. As Campbell notes, the 'Regency romance has a worldwide audience' and cannot, by definition, be set anywhere but England.³⁰ Fantasy fiction is often set in imaginary worlds, much of it based on Europe. Fantasy writer Dart-Thornton notes how her childhood reading of 'absolutely adore[d]' fantasy set up a 'dichotomy between this inner world of mine which was set in the northern hemisphere and our world which was in the southern hemisphere'.³¹ Some of Australia's most internationally successful fantasy authors – for example, Trudi Canavan, Garth Nix and the late Sara Douglass – all use European-influenced settings, while Williams's Australian-desert fantasy series, *The Change*, is his only series not to secure an international publication deal for print. Dart-Thornton acknowledges the pull of the genre on setting. She admits to mixing Australian and European settings to achieve the impression of displacement

²⁶Nash, Haylee. Personal interview. 7 June 2017.

²⁷Cousins, Beverly. Personal interview. 20 Apr. 2016.

²⁸Anthony, Selwa. Personal interview. 24 Oct. 2017.

²⁹Fox, Candice. Personal interview. 7 Oct. 2016.

³⁰Campbell, Anna. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2017.

³¹Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. Personal interview. 3 June 2017.

that is such a pleasure of the fantasy genre: ‘This will wake them up’.³² Certainly, an absence of particular national markers can make a story easier to sell in multiple markets; though stories set in the big Anglophone centres of the United States and the United Kingdom are not limited in terms of international portability. Australian writers remain mindful of this portability as it underpins their careers.

The actual or potential success of Australian popular fiction in international markets is part of the reason for the reluctance of writers to identify wholly as Australian. Campbell notes, ‘I wouldn’t say I’m not conscious of the Australian market but the vast majority of my readership is American’.³³ Creating a work that may be less clearly marked as Australian, for example, by choosing an international setting or making characters non-Australian, can be directly tied to market success. Garry Disher admits this: ‘I think sometimes probably if, like a couple of my peers, I set a novel in New York or something like that I might enjoy better sales’.³⁴ US publishers often actively erase Australianisms, a process known as Americanisation. Kylie Scott’s American publisher Amy Tannenbaum notes that ‘she’s Australian so you know things will slip into . . . her works that do feel Australian but we’ll fix it . . . I shouldn’t say fix but we Americanise it’.³⁵ Williams taught himself how to write ‘in a style that works everywhere, not just Australia’ after his first agent told him, ‘I’ve tried representing Australians, it doesn’t work’.³⁶ Similarly, when writing his first novel, fantasy writer Mitchell Hogan deliberately avoided ‘inject[ing] any sort of Australian things in it which might limit the readership’.³⁷ This final example points to a key aspect of Australian popular fiction: that the objective of the work is rarely to depict Australianness, but to fulfil the expectations of genre readers. Rather than seeing themselves as national writers, our interviewees see themselves as genre writers. They have often grown up reading in their genres and learning which settings provide the most reading pleasure, and trained as writers within genre communities that span national boundaries. As Laurens notes, ‘one of the strengths of genre fiction publishing . . . is that it’s always global’.³⁸ Our interviewees certainly seem aware of this undeniable strength and do not see it as entirely incompatible with their Australian identities.

³²Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. Personal interview. 3 June 2017.

³³Campbell, Anna. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2017.

³⁴Disher, Garry. Personal interview. 27 Feb. 2018.

³⁵Tannenbaum, Amy. Personal interview. 10 June 2017.

³⁶Williams, Sean. Personal interview. 11 Apr. 2017.

³⁷Hogan, Mitchell. Personal interview. 23 Oct. 2017.

³⁸Laurens, Stephanie. Personal interview. 4 Sep. 2017.

Our primary research, then, reveals the nuances that shape the position of texts and authors in national and international literary cultures. The fine-grained detail that emerges from our interviews – from our research into contemporary popular fiction texts as they happen – adds granularity to current understandings of Australian literature and its global situation, and new perspectives to ongoing debates about how to conceptualise a national literature.

The study of Australian popular fiction, like the fiction itself, is always internationally connected and inflected. Popular fiction is organised around and through genres that are formed and sustained across international literary markets. This international focus is evident in all four essays in this cluster, which are developed from research presented at a 2017 academic conference, ‘Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction in the Twenty-First Century’. We organised this event in association with the publishing industry convention GenreCon and the State Library of Queensland. The conference revealed that Australian scholarship on popular fiction is equally likely to explore local or international popular works, and frequently and productively moves fluidly between these contexts.

The essays in this cluster present work by Australian researchers on a range of popular fiction genres. Jodi McAlister’s ‘Defining and Redefining Popular Genres: The Evolution of “New Adult” Fiction’, argues that we need more dynamic and historically sensitive academic definitions of contemporary genres. She offers a case study of the recent history of ‘new adult’ (NA) fiction, capturing the genre’s definition at three key points since its emergence in 2009. Importantly, as McAlister explains, NA fiction is not an exception to the business or culture of twenty-first century fiction in its lack of a clear or stable definition. Rather, ‘genres are in continual and swift flux’. Her new approach to genre definition provides a model for scholars seeking to produce layered and responsive accounts of established or emerging genres and subgenres that attend to their textual, social and industrial dimensions.

Catriona Mills and Geoffrey Hondroudakis explore Australian iterations of steampunk in ‘The Ends of Empire: Australian Steampunk and the Re-imagining of Euro-modernity’. Along with the fetishisation of Victorian clothes, art and architecture, steampunk often tacitly fetishises Victorian politics, particularly the narrative of European supersession that underpinned imperialism. Through a study of more than 300 Australian steampunk stories, however, Mills and Hondroudakis discover that many Australian writers have challenged ‘the supremacy of industrial Euro-modernity in steampunk’ in order to ‘reimagine, not merely reproduce, the legacies of the past’. This article shows how popular genres may speak aptly to contested issues such as how modernity is imagined, and that Australia may be a productive site for reimagining the politics of colonialism.

As the successes of Liane Moriarty and Gillian Flynn demonstrate, domestic noir has emerged as one of the most high-profile subgenres of recent years. Meg Vann's 'The Menace of Intimacy: Domestic Noir, Feminist Criminology, and Emily Maguire's *An Isolated Incident*' examines this subgenre in relation to concepts from feminist criminology that have had a broad influence across media. With a focus on the creative writing choices of crime writers, Vann shows how criminological theory pervades characterisation, narrative drive and setting in this twenty-first century subgenre.

In 'Models of Publishing and Opportunities for Change: Representations in Harlequin, Montlake and Self-Published Romance Novels', Claire Parnell combines textual analysis of ten contemporary romance novels with a consideration of how they were published, examining a continuum of digital practices that includes the output of multinational trade publishers, Amazon's own publishing imprints, and self-publishing. Parnell's findings are fascinating, suggesting that self-published romance fiction may offer more diverse representations of sexuality while still subscribing to conservative notions of gender. Her article is also of significant value for literary studies and publishing studies, as a model for the study of popular fiction within a digital media ecosystem.

As a set, the essays in this cluster advance the study of popular fiction in Australia in ways that connect with the dynamics revealed by our own primary research. Our model of 'genre worlds' recognises that the interlocking industrial, social and textual elements of popular fiction are nationally situated as well as involved in larger global shifts. Popular fiction writers are often acutely conscious of their Australianness and the effect of this on their market position and professional networks, as well as the creative choices that shape their texts. Australian popular fiction texts interact with global trends, such as the emergence of new genres analysed by McAlister, and the new digital publishing platforms explored by Parnell. At the same time, Australian interventions in these global trends may be distinctive – as with the steampunk stories analysed by Mills and Hondroudakis and the regionally set novel analysed by Vann. Popular fiction's capacity to reflect the concerns of nationally conscious writers and readers, coupled with its responsiveness to global industrial processes, makes it an ideal research object for those interested in how the category of Australian literature might be constituted in the twenty-first century.

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