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On reading

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Abstract

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On Reading

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—Desmond Manderson

Australian Book Review, August 1998 **Review of *In the Wake of Terra Nullius***

One of the more pernicious ways in which many purportedly left-leaning White Australians continue to enjoy their dominant socio-racial position is precisely by seeming to lament it – a fact verified by the proliferation of articles, books and media bulletins in the wake of Wik. Certainly, many such texts are admirable in their intent and execution; just as certainly, a great deal are cringeworthy and contemptible. The problem is knowing how to tell the difference.

Fortunately, in the case of this special journal, the prospective reader will have no such trouble. Indeed, I often found myself wanting to scream 'I don't know what you're saying, but I hate it anyway'. Seething with trite typographical punning ('B(l)acktracking', '(t)error'), pissweak logic (using 'aporia', 'contradiction' and 'paradox' synonymously), and rigorless, indulgent posturing ('Law lacks the poverty of its abandonment') one might ask what possible contribution such 'work' is making, other than to their respective authors' CVs?

The issue, however, also contains some excellent pieces – Garth Nettheim’s article is especially clear, succinct, and forceful, Hanna McGlades’s equally so, and Gordon Bennett’s paintings are awesome. There are several other notable inclusions, but so much still seems determined by Beckett’s dictum that ‘to those who have nothing, it is forbidden not to relish filth.’

—Justin Clemens

A Reply

I leave aside the obvious absurdity of Justin Clemens’ implication that a collection of twenty articles and artworks which includes contributions from indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (as well as authors from the UK, from Canada, and from the United States) may be characterised as the purported self-deprecation of a guilt-ridden, white Australian middle class. Justin Clemens wants to scream.

‘I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE SAYING, BUT I HATE IT ANYWAY’.

There are some difficult pieces in this volume. And whether or not one pursues their difficulty depends, of course, upon whether or not one is open to persuasion that the work of reading is worth while. Justin Clemens is clearly not. He wants to maintain the possibility of reading without this work; he wants, that is, to read nothing other than what he has already read. Adding little to the CV of ‘a Melbourne reviewer’, however, this is not to read at all. Indeed, it is the impossibility of reading, which begins – and which can only begin – when what one encounters is something other than simply more of the same.

‘I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE SAYING, BUT I HATE IT ANYWAY’.

This is the expression of that which, failing to recognise itself, seems only able to recognise ‘filth’. And it is, of course, this shift – from incomprehension to hatred – which goes to the heart of that violence addressed by all of the contributors to *In the Wake of Terra Nullius*.