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## Contemporary Australian Women's Writing: An Overview.

### **Abstract**

Elizabeth Jolley has dubbed the 1980s a 'moment of glory' for the woman writer in Australia, a phase in the national literary history when women writers and readers entered the mainstream. Thea Astley takes a more general view when she typifies the 80s as a 'decade of the minorities'. The traditional oppositions and centres which have organised Australian literary production have been displaced to allow space not only for the experience of women but also a marked sense of regional, ethnic and class-based difference.

books, Susan Sheridan's *Grain*, Fay Weldon's *Crucible*, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*. The biography by Ghera Adeline illustrates women writers. A bibliography edited and Margaret Murphy (Dissertation Writer and Assistant) GILLIAN WHITELOCK summarizes a tradition of women's writing in Australia, bringing innovative light and insight to the nineteenth-century writers such as Mary Colton, Eliza Follen, and Ada Cambridge.

The book is a number of chapters. The first, 'The First Years of the Century', includes the work of the first generation of women writers, including Eliza Follen, Mary Colton, and Ada Cambridge. The second, 'The Second Generation', includes the work of the second generation of women writers, including Susan Sheridan, Fay Weldon, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*. The third, 'The Third Generation', includes the work of the third generation of women writers, including Gillian Whitelock, Margaret Murphy, and Ghera Adeline. The fourth, 'The Fourth Generation', includes the work of the fourth generation of women writers, including Susan Sheridan, Fay Weldon, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*. The fifth, 'The Fifth Generation', includes the work of the fifth generation of women writers, including Gillian Whitelock, Margaret Murphy, and Ghera Adeline. The sixth, 'The Sixth Generation', includes the work of the sixth generation of women writers, including Susan Sheridan, Fay Weldon, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*. The seventh, 'The Seventh Generation', includes the work of the seventh generation of women writers, including Gillian Whitelock, Margaret Murphy, and Ghera Adeline. The eighth, 'The Eighth Generation', includes the work of the eighth generation of women writers, including Susan Sheridan, Fay Weldon, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*. The ninth, 'The Ninth Generation', includes the work of the ninth generation of women writers, including Gillian Whitelock, Margaret Murphy, and Ghera Adeline. The tenth, 'The Tenth Generation', includes the work of the tenth generation of women writers, including Susan Sheridan, Fay Weldon, and Peter's *Golden Fields and Fictions*.

## OVERVIEWS

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GILLIAN WHITLOCK

## Contemporary Australian Women's Writing: An Overview.

Elizabeth Jolley has dubbed the 1980s a 'moment of glory' for the woman writer in Australia, a phase in the national literary history when women writers and readers entered the mainstream. Thea Astley takes a more general view when she typifies the 80s as a 'decade of the minorities'. The traditional oppositions and centres which have organised Australian literary production have been displaced to allow space not only for the experience of women but also a marked sense of regional, ethnic and class-based difference.

The prominence of women's writing in the 80s was such that the WACM (as Elizabeth Webby dubs the white Anglo-Celtic male who has been the icon of Australian literary traditions and patronage) has suffered considerable anxiety. It is striking that, as we look to previews of the decade, we find little in the way of precursors for this surge. For example in her review of Australian women's novels of the 1970s in the first edition of Carole Ferrier's *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, Margaret Smith ruefully concludes that, whereas some of the earlier twentieth century literature by women can be seen as the product of first wave feminism, 'as yet in Australia there has not been a groundswell fully emerging with the second-wave.' Smith's overview stands now as a marker of how rapidly the reading of women's writing in Australia is changing, and how prolific Australian women writers have been in the past two decades. In the early 80s it was the work of Helen Garner, Thea Astley, Nene Gare and Glen Tomasetti that occupied Smith's attention, and it is noticeable that at that stage a sense of a female tradition of Australian women's writing has not yet emerged. *Wacvie* and *Karobran* are noted as examples of Black writing; and three significant lesbian novels, *All That False Instruction*, *Palomino*, and *Alone*, which focus on 'the doomed quality of Australian lesbian relationships', are mentioned. Smith concludes that there is still no conscious attempt to come to terms with the history of women and a female tradition in literature here.

Now, ten years on, the contours of the groundswell in women's writing related to second wave feminism are clearly evident. Although the more generous arts-funding policies begun by the Labor federal government in the early 70s in the first instance did not foster women's writing in particular, there was a flourishing feminist culture which was the seedbed for women's writing. Work by Australian writers such as Christina Stead, Henry Handel Richardson and Katherine Sussanah Prichard were included in the women's studies courses which got underway in a number of Australian universities by the mid-70s. Reviews of early second-wave fiction (such as Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* and Jean Bedford's *Country Girl*) were unfavourable. However a more receptive and feminised literary culture emerged in magazines and journals associated with the women's movement, such as *Hecate*, *Lip*, *Scarlet Woman*, *Refractory Girl*, and *Sibyl*. These journals generated a polemical feminist criticism. By the 80s a number of important feminist critical works challenged the traditional constructions of Australian cultural and literary studies: Kay Schaffer's *Women and the Bush*, Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at*

*Home*, Susan Sheridan's *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, and Ferrier's *Gender, Politics and Fiction*. Bibliographies by Debra Adelaide (*Australian Women Writers. A Bibliographic Guide*) and Margaret Murphy (*Women Writers and Australia*) facilitated revisions and excavations of a tradition of women's writing in Australia, bringing into new light (and re-publication) nineteenth-century writers such as Mary Gaunt, Rosa Praed, and Ada Cambridge.

In one of a number of anthologies of Australian women's writing published late in the 80s, *Eight Voices of the Eighties*, I selected work from those writers who have been typified as the 'crest' of the current wave of women's writing here: Helen Garner, Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson, Barbara Hanrahan, Olga Masters, Kate Grenville, Elizabeth Jolley and Beverley Farmer. I made this selection rather self-consciously, aware of the promotion of women writers in a 'star' system and the way that this group of writers are all part of the dominant, white Anglo Celtic culture in Australia. An anthology by Sneja Gunew and Jan Mahyuddin also published in 1989, *Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women's Writing*, reminds us that the surge in women's writing has produced a new constellation of writers: Inez Baranay, Lily Brett, Ania Walwicz, Rosa Cappiello, Sara Dowse, Beth Yahp, Antigone Kefala, Angelika Fremd, Lolo Houbein are the best known of a much larger group of writers who write from a diversity of non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds. As Gunew and Mahyuddin argue in the preface to their anthology, these writers offer new 'Australias'; for many women writing from multicultural, non-English-speaking backgrounds, places from which to speak have been absent, or subsumed in an often common assumption that such places are, and have always been, universally available to any member of a society.

Anthologies, overviews and critical appraisals allow us to take cross sections of perceptions of Australian literary culture cross the past decade or so. As we have seen, Margaret Smith in 1980 viewed nothing like the complex and diverse women's culture which editors of anthologies scanned in 1989. The recent re-publication of Ferrier's *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, a second edition with some revisions, is another opportunity for gauging the 'state of the art', as it were. Like Ferrier, I tend to think that Thea Astley was slightly premature in identifying the 80s as the 'decade of the minorities'. New chapters in Ferrier's book address Aboriginal women's writing, erotic and lesbian writing, and the erosion of traditional generic distinctions in current writing. It may well be that an array of different perspectives is emerging more fully now, in the wake of the incursions made by women writers in the 80s. Aboriginal women's narratives by writers such as Monica Clare, Labumore, Mum Shirl, Ella Simon, Sally Morgan, Ruby Langford, Glenyse Ward, Eva Johnson, Doris Pilkington and Mabel Edmund are increasingly recognised as distinctive and complex narratives, worthy of recognition as literature (rather than the conventional acceptance as history or sociology). Of course Sally Morgan's *My Place* is one of the best known Australian novels of the 80s. What is less often remarked upon is the recent emergence of a significant number of autobiographical writings by Aboriginal women. Ferrier's reading of these novels identifies strategies of resistance which are mobilised in these texts as markers of a different aesthetic, an intervention which challenges the conventional generic boundaries of English literature.

Bronwen Levy's chapter on women's erotic writing reminds us that the changed configuration of women's literary production in Australia and elsewhere is due to both the development of a market for women's writing and the more sophisticated and diverse ways of reading women's writing in terms of issues of gender and sexuality. So Levy's reading of erotic writing (that field which, you will recall, Smith identified as marked by 'doom') recognises the place of Mary Fallon's *Working Hot* (1989) as an Australian version of *The Lesbian Body*, and as one of the most interesting recent Australian fictions. Yet she also re-reads earlier writers, such as Zora Cross and Lesbia

Harford, so elucidating a long-standing tradition of erotic (and anti-erotic) writing previously obscured.

The developments in writing, publishing and criticism I have glossed here are both a pleasure and a danger for the woman writer and critic. Australian women writers have in the past decade found a market and an intelligentsia sensitive to issues of gender and sexuality to an unprecedented extent. However critics have begun to express concern about the current mainstreaming and apparent domestication of women's writing. Bronwen Levy has argued from a marxist perspective, for example, that mainstream women's writing is relatively apolitical, the emphasis on domestic and personal issues can be absorbed into the masculinist literary tradition as a kind of women's version of Australian nationalism. In the past few years a number of feminist small presses and magazines have either closed or been incorporated. Writers such as Anna Couani have expressed concern at the current forms of production and marketing of women's writing in Australia; 'now that we have so many more women in print and multinational corporations catering to the women's market, we are faced with the structuring of our women's writing world brought about by marketing executives, arts bureaucrats, etc., but not necessarily by feminists and rarely by people/institutions which are independent of "market forces"'. The concerns I am drawing attention to here are, of course, not particular to the Australian scene; my point is that in tracking the course of women's writing here and elsewhere we need to look beyond the boundaries of texts themselves to the institutions within which they are produced, circulated, promoted and read. How we choose to read the shift of women's writing and criticism away from the periphery and the activist base of an organised feminist movement towards the mainstream concerns of publishers, academics and the market will depend upon our political and personal agendas. 'Feminisation' has amounted to an increased visibility of women in publishing, reviewing and academia. Has it also validated a certain kind of writing (generally the expressive realist mode) and the movement of a benign feminism into the mainstream? Can writings accorded coffee table status function in opposition?

These questions and our responses to them will be critical in determining the future development and reception of women's writing in Australia. Recently there have been a number of feature articles on high profile women in Australia, many of these (Hilary McPhee, Lyndall Crisp, Louise Adler, Ita Buttrose among them) have their power base in the publishing industry. Louise Adler, director of Heinemann Australia, is particularly proud of having 'won over' Thea Astley from her longtime publisher, Penguin, in 1990. 'I have relaunched Thea. She had become part of that Penguin image of contemporary Australian writers. I think she is one of the best Australia has, and I wanted to market her very individually.' (*Weekend Review*, 23-24/1/93) Adler claims to have sold 'two to three times as many as most of Astley's books with Penguin.' This claim has immediately been contested by the Penguin General Manager, nevertheless this clash of the Titans must amuse Thea Astley, whose work remained neglected for many years until the emergence of a readership for women's writing in the late 70s. That Astley's work is now, twenty years on, the object of power plays and counter claims between Australia's publishing supremos is indeed ironic. That her work finds a wide readership is sweet reward towards the end of a long and frequently neglected career as a writer. However this clash also reminds us that the rules of the game have changed little now women are in the driver's seat. It is now more likely that there will be a number of women writers in any anthology, collection or overview of 'Australian writing'. However the demise of so many of the small publishers and journals which fuelled the proliferation of women's writing in the past decades, and the likely cut back of Arts funding through the Australia Council suggest that in the next decade the minorities will be in 'a time of hard'.