

## **In Search of Australian Literature**

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**IAC Culture Talks, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture,  
Western Sydney University**

**21 February 2024**

People sometimes ask me to suggest Australian books to read. That's because I'm regarded as an expert in the field and they are curious about Australian literature. They want to know where they can find it. They want to know what it is. They're not alone in this. One of the questions that has dogged discussion of Australian literature is definition. Put simply, what is literature, what is Australian and what are they in combination? It's up for grabs. That's what makes this a search—as in the title of this talk—rather than a destination that can be summed up in a book list.

Australian literature exists as a category, of course. It's used in library catalogues and in bookshops. There is a code for research grant applications. There are associations and journals devoted to it. There are university courses on Australian writing and it's a compulsory component in most school English

curricula. Federal and state governments see it as a duty to support literary writing and publishing. Living Australian authors win prizes and appear in the media (even if the work of dead Australian authors is often out of print).

Australian literature is *necessary*. It is part of our life as Australians, in book clubs and at writers' festivals, and for all of us who are readers.

Yet the confidence about Australian literature suggested by all this activity can be deceptive. There is, unsurprisingly, confusion about what counts as Australian literature, what constitutes it, to the point where I sometimes don't know what we're talking about. But that's ok. If we think only of novels, for example, they range from bestsellers to literary prize-winners that may only sell modestly, and everything in between. The Victorian Prize for Literature for 2024, 'your definitive guide to Australia's best writing', went to *Chinese Fish* by Grace Yee—not a novel, but a wonderful work of experimental poetry that also narrates a family saga, published by Giramondo, based here at Western Sydney University. Media reports couldn't resist telling us how much the lucky author took home: \$125,000.<sup>1</sup> In literature there's luck and there's timing. There's new and there's old, and there's always more.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/feb/01/victorian-premiers-literary-awards-2024-winner-grace-yee-debut-poet-chinese-fish>

So, in offering myself to you as a guide on this occasion, I'm going to divide my talk roughly into three parts. In the first part I'll consider the history of Australian literature, speaking as a scholar. In the second part I'll talk as an author about my own work in the context of Australian literature. In the third part I will look around at where we are now and note some trends from the point of view of a reader.

The contemporary is where I will conclude. But the contemporary always has a history, even when it's trying to break from history. The contemporary points to the future too, or at least an imagined version of it, as speculative fiction shows in depicting the unfolding climate emergency—dystopic but only just.

Let's start with the past. What I mean by the history of Australian literature is really how the history of Australian literature has been written and how the idea of an Australian literature has been conceived and shaped. Most of us first encounter Australian literature in high school, where it comes framed for us by decisions made for us about what we should read, decisions about what best represents Australian literature, and, through it, what best represents Australia, for kids our age. It comes trailing history.

As it came to be written, Australian literary history was constructed in periods, starting with the colonial, from ‘beginnings’—more of that later—to Federation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a nation-building period through the two world wars to 1950, in which building a national culture was important. That was followed by the postwar present—when I was a schoolboy, fifty years ago—which is now our past. This history was a narrative of growth, a new, young country maturing into something that could stand on its own two feet. That was the story for literature too. It consolidated around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when literary study professionalised, tentative canons were proposed and courses established.

Looking back we see how the English language arrived in Australia with British colonisation, where for a time it co-existed with Aboriginal languages, and other languages such as Gaelic and Chinese, before becoming the dominant language, the language of domination, of administration and the printing press, and of most of the writing that was done. With the English language came English literary forms, adapted for the colonial situation, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was an identifiable literature, directed in part at readers in the Mother Country, Britain, who might be curious about far-off Australia and who might even be thinking of migrating. It also spoke to readers in Australia, who had a more informed view. This literature was factual and fantastical at once,

propaganda of sorts. It documented a world that had not been written about previously in that way. It inspired a line of historical fiction that is as popular now as it was then, even as we read to decolonise. But I'm jumping ahead.

By the 1890s a locally produced literature with its own stories and accents could be celebrated. Its icons are still on our money: story writer Henry Lawson and poet Banjo Paterson. It was pushed by the Sydney-based *Bulletin* magazine, valorising white men (mostly) and the bush: a grassroots phenomenon with a nationalistic dimension. This Australia aspired to independence from Britain while remaining within the bosom of the British empire. That complex identity became a theme for writers in the nation-building period that followed as they critically explored tensions between local, national and international, in novels by Henry Handel Richardson and Christina Stead, for example.

*Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* written by two women collaborating under the name 'Barnard Eldershaw', was a radical work of the 1940s, visionary and thoroughly local. It ends with an apocalyptic prospect of Sydney in flames.

Distinctively Australian cultural achievement could be a source of pride. Public support and government funding got behind it. Scholars and teachers were keen to see Australian literature take its place in the world. This was a sign of growing up. Writing in *Meanjin* in 1954, poet and scholar A.D. Hope made the case for introducing the study of Australian literature at Canberra University College (later ANU), where he was a professor. His argument is subtle, almost ambivalent. He sees Australian literature as *part of* but *apart from* English literature. It's a balancing act between the nativist and the cosmopolitan:

because our native literature is a minor one among the literatures of the world, because it is limited in range and has hardly any writers of first rank, and because it is a branch of English literature in general, its study should not be simply an alternative to the study of English literature. It should, I believe, be undertaken only by students who have already undergone or who are undergoing training in one of the major world literatures, preferably that of England.<sup>2</sup>

Fifty years ago, in 1973, Patrick White won the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded for introducing 'a new continent into literature'. That confirmed the coming of age—even if we now want to say that the continent had been around for a long time. By 1988 literary celebration reached its peak, perhaps best seen

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<sup>2</sup> Hope, A.D. Australian Literature and the Universities. *Meanjin* 13.2 (1954): 165-69. I'm grateful to Lynda Ng for this quote.

in the success of *Oscar and Lucinda* by Peter Carey, another historical fiction of Australia's past, a quirky love story that concludes with the surreal image of a glass church floating up the river, which won the Booker Prize that year and was praised for being 'endlessly inventive'. 1988 marked the bicentenary of colonisation, 200 years since Invasion Day, and absences were starting to show.

A new period was beginning, heralded by Kim Scott's *True Country*, published in 1993, and followed soon after by Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* in 1997, inaugurating a flourishing of literary fiction by Aboriginal Australians that extended the achievements of the First Nations poets, playwrights and memoir writers who were their precursors. Since Wright won the Miles Franklin Literary Prize for her novel *Carpentaria* in 2007, Kim Scott has won it for *That Deadman Dance* in 2011 (having shared it in 2000), Melissa Lucashenko won it for *Too Much Lip* in 2020 and Tara June Winch won it for *The Yield* in 2021, and Tony Birch has been shortlisted twice—all contemporary Indigenous Australian writers, and celebrated internationally, including translation into Chinese. Professor Li Yao translated *Carpentaria* and Professor Jing Han (Han Jing) has translated *Too Much Lip*.

That's a renaissance, a rebirth, and it takes me back to my earlier point about beginnings. Where does Australian literature begin? First Nations writers draw

on storytelling that is millennia old, oral literature if you like, or writing in the form of mark-making that is different from English. Alexis Wright speaks of this place as:

a library land, its knowledge stored in and created from the country itself through epical stories from ancient times. An almost unimaginable massive archive, cared for by its people through their spiritual connections to various parts of the physical landscape.<sup>3</sup>

Those stories, that library, that literature all exist before, after and beyond what has been understood as Australian literature until recently. There is a new rewriting of the field underway in this generation, this contemporary moment, and it extends outwards to greater inclusivity and diversity as well as a more informed and critical scrutiny of how we read the past.

At a recent conference on ‘Antipodean Modernism Today’ held by the English Faculty at Cambridge University, poet Evelyn Araluen is quoted as saying: “I am not a generous reader of settler literature.”<sup>4</sup>

Nor should any of us be.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, Alexis. ‘Odyssey of the Horizon’, in Natalie King (ed.) *Tracy Moffatt: My Horizon*. Melbourne: Thames and Hudson Australia, 2017, pp. 114-117.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron Hurst, ‘Oldheads and Young Moderns’, *The Paris End* 1 Feb 2024 <https://theparisend.substack.com/p/oldheads-and-young-moderns>



These changes are brought into focus by the appearance of four volumes that offer a range of new resources and approaches: *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel* edited by Nicholas Birns and Louis Klee (2023); *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel* edited by David Carter (2023); *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Poetry* edited by Ann Vickery (2024); and *The Cambridge History of Australian Poetry* edited by Ann Vickery and Philip Mead (forthcoming). This significant investment by Cambridge University Press makes available the collective scholarly labour of many people at work today and we can only be grateful. Nicholas Birns (based at NYU) writes that one motivation for the volume he co-edited with Louis Klee:

was our feeling that the Australian novel was seen worldwide too much in terms of its content and not its form. ... We also wanted to emphasize how diverse Australian fiction has become. This diversity is not just in terms of writers, but also of readerships: it includes the diversity of those who study Australian literature.<sup>5</sup>

He concludes, ‘Together, these volumes show an Australian literature transformed both materially and conceptually from what it was a short time ago.’ That’s good. These books explore new relationships between us now and our situation in the present and a troubling, often simplified or distorted past we

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cambridgeblog.org/2023/02/what-is-new-with-the-australian-novel/>

may wish to ignore. Literature can help bridge some of the divides in understanding.

Still, new frames create new exclusions, as Lisa Hill outlines in her frank review of the Companion to the Australian Novel:

What I wanted, and didn't get, was anything to supplement what I already know about historical movements in literature: nationalism, modernism; postmodernism; the social novel; experimentalism; the preoccupation with fictionalising militarism, and feminism: from the 1st wave (mid C19th to after WW1; 2nd (1960s-80s); 3rd (1990s) and the present day. I wanted some coherent guidance about who and what to read as representative of Australian novel-writing and some analysis of why it's interesting.

I don't know who might be the audience for this companion, but it isn't me.<sup>6</sup>

I quote this reaction to show just how great the disagreements about Australian literature can be. Hill too, herself an expert, says she wants a guide. I know the feeling. The Companion only intensifies the search.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://anzlitlovers.com/2023/09/19/the-cambridge-companion-to-the-australian-novel-2023-edited-by-nicholas-birns-louis-kee/>

Look out for the podcast on this topic with my colleague Lynda Ng produced by the Sydney Review of Books and Impact Studios at UTS, available in June.

Lynda, another Australian literature specialist, to whom I owe the A D Hope quote earlier, has recently been appointed Lecturer in *World Literature* at the University of Melbourne. That's an interesting shift, suggesting that Australian literature is now part of world literature.

I reviewed *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel* for *The Conversation* in November:

<https://theconversation.com/how-is-the-great-australian-novel-going-not-too-bad-thanks-214456>

It's been fifteen years since the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* came out, on which I was general editor. It is fascinating to see the change in that time. In the new Cambridge history, settler colonialism is unsettled at every turn. There's a reduced canon, as I point out in my review: Richardson, Stead, White, Stow, Malouf—and the addition, to judge by the number of respectful mentions (almost double anyone else), of Alexis Wright. In its place, as Eugenia Flynn writes in her chapter on 'Australian Indigenous Literary Culture', 'an established canon of Australian Indigenous literary fiction

can now be affirmed'.<sup>7</sup> The Cambridge History includes chapters on 'The Australian Novelist in Asia' by David Walker, 'The Making of the Asian Australian Novel' by Emily Yu Zong and 'The Arab Australian Novel' by Jumana Bayeh. Together they cover a wider range of writers, including many new ones, than were available for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, which had a cut-off date of 2000.

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That leads me to my own work. My first two novels were family stories beginning in South Australia and moving outwards. The second, *Paper Nautilus*, moved backwards chronologically to World War 2 and before, and north to Darwin and the islands to Australia's north. Two brothers go to the war and only one comes back. Published in 1987, the novel did well and was read by many people. It had affinities with David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*, published five years earlier, and with Randolph Stow's *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*, published in 1965, which I read at school. Writer Jennifer Mills, who spoke at the launch of my new novel, *The Idealist*, recently said she came across *Paper Nautilus* before she knew she would be a writer and that it made quote

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<sup>7</sup> P. 584.

‘quite an impression on me, presenting a version of this country I hadn’t encountered elsewhere’. I mention this to show that there are hidden, even secret currents in the history of literature in terms of the books and writers that influence us.

My next novel went still further back in time and travelled further in distance to China. I thought of it as a novel about connections between China and Australia and part of the backstory was loosely inspired by my great-grandparents’ story. They were missionaries in Linhai, near Ningbo, in the 1890s and helped build a hospital there. My grandfather was born there, before they moved to Adelaide. The novel was published under the title *Avenue of Eternal Peace* in 1989.

*Chang’an dajie* in Mandarin. It is largely set in Beijing, where most of it was written. I was lecturing at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 1986 and at East China Normal University in 1987. (How wonderful that the Australian Studies Centres at both universities are partners in today’s talk!) The novel I writing back then was overtaken by contemporary events. It is grounded in that present, in the atmosphere I experienced in China in those tremendous years, as I became one more connection between China and Australia. I went on to write a historical fantasy and a love story that paid homage to a Chinese literary classic, Shen Fu’s memoir *Six Chapters of a Floating Life Fu Sheng Liu Ji*, published as *The Red Thread* in 2000 (and translated into Chinese, again by

Professor Li Yao, for publication in China in 2007). Later, back in Sydney in the 1990s, I found that there were more Chinese on the streets than ever before, many of them speaking Mandarin. Some of them were friends from my time in China. I published a novel inspired by some of those stories too, called *Original Face*, in 2005, set all over Sydney, particularly Western Sydney.

I was already studying Chinese when I wrote *Paper Nautilus*. Something seems to have carried across. Towards the end one of the brothers vows to ‘live his life ... like a white unfurling scroll or a paper nautilus ... seeking completion.’ It’s an image of a handscroll which you can look at moving one way or another. My decision to learn Chinese in Canberra, where I was working, and then to work in China for what turned out to be five years was certainly a major step for me, a step beyond the boundaries of Australian writing. I felt that as a writer I needed something to write about and, in a complex sense, that was China. *Avenue of Eternal Peace* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin prize in 1990. I was informed that it couldn’t win because it wasn’t Australian enough.

When people read my work, they often say that it reminds them of things they have forgotten. Someone read *Avenue* recently and said it took him straight back to his time in Beijing in the 1980s. As a writer I appreciate mobility and the way place can generate story. My novels move around in space and time, around a

central crisis that can be political but is personal too. There's a quest and a mystery. Those characteristics apply to *The Idealist*, published last year and set in Sydney, South Australia, Canberra, Timor-Leste and Washington DC, with a focus on the time of the referendum on independence for East Timor in 1998-9, but going back much further in time and forward a little too. There is freedom and there is constraint in my writing, in terms of form and style too. *Paper Nautilus* has six chapters. *The Red Thread*, my re-imagining of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, has six chapters (in the Chinese original the last two were lost and there are only four). *The Idealist* has four parts, the last two of which are double, making again six parts in all. It's artful in that way.

Readers have said that *The Idealist* differs from other Australian novels in its concentration, its political dimension and its moral probing, and that it ventures where other Australian novels don't go. Does that make it un-Australian? It has been compared with John Le Carre and Graham Greene. I call it a political mystery, where the political is inseparable from private conscience. It has been compared with Christopher Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), an Australian novel from another time. I think of George Johnston's fine China novel, *The Far Road* (1962), where two foreign correspondents find themselves among people who are fleeing war and devastation; and the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer's great Buru quartet (1980-88) which I read in the

translation by Max Lane published by Penguin Australia—not that I’m comparing myself. I only want to make a point about the influences that can make and shape an Australian novel. People who have followed Australia’s duplicitous dealings with East Timor since 1975 up to the trial of Witness K have responded to my book, as have many others who say they were not paying attention at the time, or were just too young when it happened. Part of a novel’s social effect can include remembering together. Concerns and preoccupations repeat themselves, as they do in my work.

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Turning now to the contemporary scene, and how the features of earlier phases of Australian literature are being repeated, varied and challenged by new writers. In 2014 Michael Mohammed Ahmad published his first work of fiction which he called *The Tribe* (2014). A novel called *The Lebs* followed in 2018. There’s an extent to which reading has become tribal in recent years. Tribes are a theme, a feature and a point of identification. Partly this shows publishers responding to social and demographic change. It is a marketing impulse to match books with readers’ profiles. But that can be misleading. Reading doesn’t necessarily work like that. We recognise voices that are familiar but we also welcome voices that are unfamiliar, especially when they’re new. And can be



particularly attracted by voices that manage to be both familiar and strange at once. That's what writing does: it familiarises and it de-familiarises. Ahmad has been described as a Western Sydney writer and a Muslim Arab author. Those are two of his tribes. But he probably feels uncomfortable about being labelled. Like most contemporary Australian writers, he is negotiating multiple and uneasy categories: gender, genre, language, generation, locality, class, religion, background, race and power relations, often with a high degree of self-exposure. But ultimately it's about the writing.

Jessica Au's prizewinning novel *Cold Enough for Snow* (2022) is about estrangement and intimacy at the same time. A Chinese-speaking migrant mother and her English-speaking daughter travel from Melbourne, where they live, for a holiday in Japan. The story is written in minimalist prose that registers the detail of thought and interaction in place and time with diary-like interiority. This precise intergenerational story has not been available before. Here, through Au's artistry, it achieves a large resonance that makes it powerful, relatable reading.

Another example is Shannon Burns's *Childhood: A Memoir* (2022). The life experience this book conveys is extreme and painful. The writing records the boy's emotions and intelligence as he grows in awareness and insight. The

approach combines a unique personal testimony with a sociological study of a tribal world—the working and under class of suburban Adelaide—that doesn't feature much in literature. Yet reading literature from others worlds helps the boy survive too, as does the author's demonstrated capacity for finding his own language to understand and communicate what he has lived through.

I am moved and impressed by both these works and happy to recommend them. Both are original and break new ground, even as they deal with the time-honoured theme of parents and children. Each speaks for a cohort while reaching beyond its tribe. The act of writing invites readers in, enabling us to read each other and know each other better.

Apart from those two books, there are quite a few others I have read recently as part of my continuing search. I'm currently reading *Praiseworthy* for a second time, Alexis Wright's cosmic whodunnit for the 'all times', in preparation for conversations we will have at Adelaide Writers' Week soon. Do I belong to all these different tribes? Yes and no. Only by affinity and choice. Negotiating the disparities and situating yourself in relation to the writer's position is a key aspect and interest of the search for Australian literature as it goes on today, as I see it. I hope you'll read some of these books and see what you find.

Thank you to Professor Jing Han, Director of the Institute for Australia China Arts and Culture at Western Sydney University for inviting me to ‘culture talk’ today and thanks to all of you for listening.

Thank you for listening, and thank you to IAC Director Prof Jing Han and her staff for inviting me and for arranging this talk.