

Book Review

Susan Sheridan, *The Fiction of Thea Astley*. New York, USA: Cambria Press, 2016. ISBN 9781604979329, 186 pages.

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Australian novelist Thea Astley became known for her inclination to stare down the good fortune (four Miles Franklin awards) of her literary success during her lifetime with a persistent and self-generating narrative of having been neglected as a writer. It was never true then, and certainly not now. In fact, from this vantage point, over a decade after her death in 2004, critical attention paid to this gifted novelist has possibly reached a high point.

Something equally important needs to be said here: whatever Astley criticism lacked in number—if it did—is made up for in the loyalty and passion evident in those who have devoted many years of scholarship to her work. Sheridan, though she may be disinclined to name herself in this way, implicitly alludes to this fact when she notes the early and important work of Paul Genoni, her fellow editor of the collection of essays *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge Scholars, 2006). Sheridan has dedicated much of her time to understanding and contextualising Astley's fiction, and included a portrait of Astley in her own *Nine Lives: Post-war Women Making Their Mark* (UQP, 2011).

The Fiction of Thea Astley (2016) is a development of that work, a significant full-length critical study by a scholar already well-versed in Astley's creative endeavours. It is also an essential book, one that even until last year did not exist. This, finally, is what Thea Astley longed for in her life: someone who would look at all her novels, who could read back to her what she barely understood herself; detail the nature of her obsessions over time, chart the discernible shifts in her perspective and subjects.

Not only, one suspects, would Astley have been pleased; because of its design, Sheridan's monograph will serve the purposes of a diverse range of readers. Even the succinct biographical note on Astley in the Introduction, which is also interpretive to a degree, invites the reader at an early stage to see the framing of Astley's key fictional interests. There is here, too, a short section on 'style'—unusual in this kind of critical work. Readers therefore get a 'taste' of what less enamoured critics used to loathe about Astley's writing, but which Sheridan identifies as the typical "compressed prose" ("River gasped and sucked lazily") of Astley's first and early novels.

From here, *The Fiction of Thea Astley* moves into chapters—seven in all—about the novels. They are grouped in such a way as to suggest not just a chronology, but a likeness in either style or content that bears some serious critical attention. Occasionally, a false moment results from this method—perhaps inevitable—such as likening the callow journalist George Brewster from *The Well-Dressed Explorer* (1962) with the genius-musician Holberg from *The Acolyte* (1972) as studies in "creative personality" seems a bit of stretch. On the whole, though, the arrangements for chapters work and seem natural if one considers Astley's

preoccupations as a writer, and indeed her concerns about writing itself. Over her lifetime she struggles with finding a narrative voice that was right for her; she strived for psychological insight into her characters; was dedicated to the story of place—North Queensland; and revisited always questions of form and style, especially in her late career; she sought to represent in fiction Australia's past and the politics of race and power, and the inevitable violence it produces.

This last concern has its own chapter in 'Communal Violence,' and it is one of the book's strengths. Astley liked to recast with irony as her interest in the "congregatory aspects of abrading," but critics have at times wondered why she kept returning to scenes of such appalling mob violence in her novels. *The Fiction of Thea Astley* provides the best answer so far. Sheridan is able to bring to this discussion her considerable knowledge of Astley and aspects of her life, reminding us that her Catholic background meant that she was forever aware of "the divine limits to the power she can exercise as a writer, in a fallen, patriarchal world." This is a crucial acknowledgement at this point.

Sheridan has the unusual ability to take a point such as this, simple and effective, and link it to much more complex material about the subject matter: male violence. The chapter ends, for example, by reminding us about the discourse on subjectivity itself, with reference to the work of Luce Irigaray. Again, the strength in the writing here is that Sheridan is then able to place those views within the context of Astley's own very nuanced—and that is being polite—views on feminism.

The Fiction of Thea Astley is an important book, both in its imaginative reach, its stylish form, and its critical insights about the fiction of Thea Astley. It offers the benefits of deep scholarship in a refreshingly readable style, making it the perfect choice for newcomers to Astley's work. It is also possible for more informed readers to gain a lot from Sheridan's approach since there is an elegant simplicity at work in her broader frame of reference to works by other writers and scholars.

Karen Lamb is the author of *Thea Astley: Inventing Her Own Weather* (UQP, 2015), shortlisted for five national literary awards, and winner of the prestigious Prime Minister's Award for Non-Fiction for 2016. She has edited a book of Australian short stories, and published book chapters and articles on Australian authors, including a book on Peter Carey. She teaches literature at the Australian Catholic University and lives in Sydney.

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