

digilit

Literatur und Literaturvermittlung
im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung

Band 3

Herausgegeben von

Matthias Beilein, Claudia Stockinger und Simone Winko

Doris Moser / Claudia Dürr (Hg.)

Über Bücher reden

Literaturrezeption in Lesegemeinschaften

Mit einer Abbildung

V&R unipress

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ISBN Print: 9783847113232 – ISBN E-Lib: 9783737013239

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <https://dnb.de> abrufbar.

Veröffentlicht mit Unterstützung der Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften der Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt.

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ISSN 2512-8930

ISBN 978-3-7370-1323-9

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Reading Fiction, Talking Reconciliation: Australian Book Clubs, Book Talk and the Politics of History

Abstract

This paper reports on research into the reception of Australian historical fiction amongst book club readers. We consider a group of novels we term *fictions of reconciliation*. Given their popularity, the controversies they have incited, and their foregrounding of contemporary concerns about Australian history and race relations, these novels provide an opportunity to explore the legacies of colonial violence, the role of reading in thinking through these legacies, and how book clubs provide a space for critical reflection through vernacular criticism.

Since at least the publication of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* in 1984, literary scholars in the English-speaking world have been interested in the practices of so-called ordinary or lay readers. This interest in *vernacular criticism* has grown over the last twenty years with the study of book groups. Central to such interest is a concern with the way book group readers engage with literature and with other readers to reflect on often quite challenging issues—the impacts of social change, history, politics, and economy on their daily lives and communities.

As Australian postcolonial literary critics, we have been concerned with the way readers use literature to think and work through the challenges of living in a culture situated in the aftermath of colonialism. We became interested in book clubs and the social practices of reading in part as a response to a publishing phenomenon we have termed elsewhere *fictions of reconciliation*¹. Though not exclusively historical, fictions of reconciliation are novels published in Australia after 2000 that explicitly address the legacies of the European invasion of the Australian continent after 1788, and the enduring impacts of dispossession, assimilation, and genocide on Indigenous Australians. Published in the wake of a decade-long government-sponsored program of intercultural reconciliation, fictions of reconciliation include Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, *The Lieu-*

1 NOLAN/CLARKE 2011.

tenant, and Sarah Thornhill; Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* and *Taboo*, Gail Jones' *Sorry*, and Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* and *The Landscape of Farewell*. These novels tell stories that are explicitly concerned with colonial and postcolonial violence, and employ scenarios and narrative techniques that resonate with contemporary concerns about race politics and reconciliation. Moreover, they are framed by paratextual elements that reference reconciliation. Many have appeared among the winners, or on the short or long lists, of national literary prizes including the Miles Franklin Award, and have often incited public debate.

Kate Grenville's novels have made interesting case studies of the way readers use book clubs to address the demands of reconciliation in Australia. Grenville's *The Secret River* was attacked by a number of critics and academics. Some historians and literary critics positioned the novel as a "sorry text" that appeals to ordinary readers because it assuages white guilt.² *The Secret River*, in the eyes of its detractors, is complicit with the very ideologies that it ostensibly writes against. Our investigations with book clubs about their reception of this novel have been motivated in large part as a response to these critical anxieties.

We undertook a study with five book clubs, recording their conversations about *The Secret River* and conducting focus group discussions afterward. In our focus groups, we observed a range of reading positions adopted. While the concerns of the novel's detractors were sometimes confirmed; in many cases, they were not. Readers' responses were rarely simple, and the dynamics of the group discussions produced various, and at times highly ambivalent, readings of the novel. Since then, Maggie Nolan has examined the reception of other novels such as Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, and Miller's *The Landscape of Farewell*.³ In so doing, we have explored how book club readers grapple with the power of fiction to represent contested histories and to address the challenges of finding a just rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The work that we have undertaken is informed by research on reading as a social practice. Our research focuses on "how readers beyond the academy talk about, use and make sense" of literary texts.⁴ Such a perspective has a long tradition⁵ yet largely runs *contra* to dominant trends in literary studies. Too often the study of literary reception is focused on the hermeneutic practices of professional literary scholars and the work they undertake in scholarly publications and classrooms; or on socio-cultural formations that underpin the tastes and

2 See WEAVER-HIGHTOWER 2010. See also NOLAN/CLARKE 2011; CLARKE/NOLAN 2014; NOLAN/CLARKE 2014.

3 NOLAN 2016; NOLAN 2020.

4 PROCTER AND BENWELL 2014, p. 1; See also, CHABOT DAVIS 2014; FULLER SEDO 2013; HARTLEY/TURVEY 2004; LONG 2003.

5 See, for instance, RICHARDS 1929.

consumption patterns of different cohorts of readers. Examining how non-professional readers engage in criticism has, until relatively recently, been largely absent.

In this chapter, we examine *vernacular criticism*; specifically, book club readers' talk and responses to Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill*. Vernacular literary criticism is a discourse of judgment on the aesthetic, political, and ethical merits and faults of writing, books, storytelling, and authors that takes place largely outside the education system, and other institutions crucial to what Wendy Griswold calls the "reading class" such as publishing.⁶ Indeed, this form of criticism has an ambivalent relationship to the education system and the publishing industry. Vernacular criticism is the book talk of those readers who are imperfectly identified by terms like the 'reading public' and 'general/ordinary/lay/non-professional readers'. It is the kind of talk observed in sites such as book clubs and online reading communities.

Like academic literary criticism, vernacular literary criticism is a form of book talk that has aesthetic, moral, and political valence. One of its central features is that it mobilizes the reading and discussion of books as a context for reflection on everyday morality and politics. As Michael D. Bristol explains, vernacular criticism is not simply "the interpretive amateurism" of different classes of readers; rather it "is an attempt [by ordinary readers] to find an orientation in a space of moral questions."⁷ In the past, vernacular literary criticism has been cited in overlooked, undocumented, or ephemeral spaces: in diaries; in salons; at literary festivals and other gatherings of readers; book clubs and reading groups; in newsletters and letters to editors; and in the conversations of individuals with no formal interests in the industries of criticism or the production of literature other than through their status as consumers and members of the reading class.

We can compare and contrast the vernacular criticism of book clubs with that of the literary studies classroom. Vernacular criticism takes place outside the academy, is values-driven, and tends towards 'open' discussions that invite disagreement and dissensus. It is personal and tentative. It is a form of criticism that values playfulness, and is explicitly dialogical and context-specific. On matters of form, vernacular criticism focuses heavily on characterization and plot, and amongst other things, actively supports reader-identification with the text through personal reminiscence and analogical analysis with contemporary events and situations. The book provides a context for conversation/conviviality and the text is taken at face value—as Elizabeth Long puts it, readers assume an ontological equivalence between fictional characters and situations and real people and events.

6 GRISWOLD 2008.

7 BRISTOL 2000, p. 91.

Indeed, conversation is key to understanding vernacular criticism. As Long explains:

[P]articipants in book groups create a conversation that begins with the book each woman has read but moves beyond the book to include the personal connections and meanings each has found in the book, and the new connections with the book, with inner experience, and with the perspectives of the other participants that emerge within the discussion ... It is as if the discussion is a lens that reveals the books under discussion and the inner lives of coparticipants and, through this process, allows participants to reflect back on their own interior lives as well. In these conversations, people can use books and each other's responses to books to promote insight and empathy in an integrative process of collective self-reflection. In that sense, reading group discussions perform creative cultural work, for they enable participants to articulate or even discover who they are: their values, their aspirations, and their stance toward the dilemmas of their worlds.⁸

In presenting these outlines of vernacular criticism, we are conscious of the risk of drawing too gross a contrast with academic criticism. Vernacular criticism is not being positioned here as academic criticism's 'other'. Moreover, we are conscious of our own critical predilections and careful not to project our biases shaped as they are by post-structuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism. We do not wish to valorize reading groups as the idealized sites of 'hospitable', 'reparative', 'implicated', or 'transgressive' reading practices; of a hermeneutics of trust rather than of suspicion. But we do want to consider how book club conversations allude to a number of important concepts that are of significance to academic literary critics. By way of example, we now turn to our work on the reception of Kate Grenville's novel *Sarah Thornhill*.

Sarah Thornhill (2011) is the sequel to Kate Grenville's controversial 2005 historical novel, *The Secret River*. In this third novel in Grenville's "colonial trilogy," the eponymous Sarah Thornhill is the youngest daughter of William Thornhill, the complex central protagonist of *The Secret River*: a book that became the focus of considerable debate about the writing of history and of readers' capacity to differentiate history and fiction. The sequel is a different kind of novel, written in the aftermath of what was an acrimonious public debate. At first glance a colonial interracial romance story, the novel is also concerned with Sarah's growing realization of her father's culpability in a massacre of the Darug people, of which Sarah is an unwitting beneficiary, and Sarah's need to make peace with her brothers' Maori relatives for the death of her niece. While Grenville establishes a conventional narrative frame (in this case, tragic historical romance), she soon departs from this to explore more contemporary concerns, including white Australian guilt and the capacity of non-Indigenous subjects to

8 LONG 2003, pp. 144–45.

reckon with the past. Although Thornhill tells his daughter to “never look back”, Sarah chooses to bear witness, accept, and confess. The novel resonates with contemporary debates concerning race relations and the moral legitimacy of the modern Australian nation through positioning of its central protagonist. It might also be said that *Sarah Thornhill* is a book well-suited to book clubs. Plot-driven, historical family romance featuring a ‘secret’ history, a smart and independent woman protagonist, with an open ending that leaves the reader with the promise of moral redemption, *Sarah Thornhill* is the kind of storytelling that actively encourages the reader to identify with characters and scenarios. It is also a book that reflects the contemporary *zeitgeist* for trauma narrative.⁹

In 2013/14, we conducted three focus groups with book clubs in Australia: two in the large southern city of Melbourne, Victoria, and a third in a small regional town in Tasmania. The groups were recruited through notices placed in the regular newsletter of the College Adult Education (CAE) Book Club program (the largest—and ostensibly the oldest—book club program in Australia), and through the database of book clubs that we have been developing since 2011. In total, 26 people (all except one were women) participated in the focus groups. In Melbourne, the first group had five members and the second 12; the Tasmanian group had nine participants. Most members were in their middle age (14 participants were 51–60 years old). Members of the Melbourne groups were more highly educated, all with a university degree, and nine with a postgraduate degree. The Tasmanian group had four members with high school attainment and five with a degree. We have reported elsewhere on the protocols of our focus groups.¹⁰ In brief, the groups included *Sarah Thornhill* within their reading schedule. When the group met to discuss the book, we audio-visually recorded the meeting (DG) and immediately following we conducted the focus group (FG). The transcripts from all three sessions were then analyzed using NVivo software and thematic content analysis. From this analysis, two themes emerged in the groups’ readings of *Sarah Thornhill*—authenticity and self-reflexivity—that reflect how readers used the text to engage with the moral questions that this book explores.

Considerations of authenticity included readers’ scrutiny of whether characters and their actions were believable in the context of the novel’s historical period, and whether or not the plot was plausible. Readers’ reflections on historical facts and fictions held in tension both a critique of truth claims, and a willingness to accept the provisional nature of such knowledge. Our readers recognized that truth claims are often complex and incomplete. They accepted the story as ‘a story’ (fiction), yet also imagined and proposed tentative accounts

⁹ See WHITEHEAD 2004; FASSIN/RECHTMAN 2009.

¹⁰ See CLARKE/NOLAN 2014; NOLAN/CLARKE 2014.

for events and actions. The readers acknowledged that story-telling—and characterization in particular—creates a space to reflect on history, and expand historical consciousness beyond archival records.

This is not to assert a consistency of responses across groups. Members of the first Melbourne group overwhelmingly asserted that they “*were not treating [the novel] as if it is history, and questioning it*” (FG1).¹¹ Some members of the second group were overtly critical of the novel’s accuracy, which was largely tempered by recognition that *non-fictional* historical accounts are also fallible:

A: I mean the history – the official history is ... just ... made up anyway, so to me, a novel is often as genuine as a history book is going to be.

...

D: History is always a personal skew [*sic*]. ... So, history is never history is never history. (FG2)

Subsequent discussions prompted a re-imagining of the past and an appreciation of historical lives that can attain their own authority by being realistic.

For the study’s readers, the story must be believable, plausible, and sincere. Readers actively analyzed these aspects of authenticity. Evidence of this includes comments such as, “*I didn’t really buy that [section of plot],*” and “*that was the bit I found really contrived, that part of the story*” (DG2). Participants acknowledged the novel’s fictionality, and valued it as such. Yet while readers were aware that historians “*will leap in*” (DG1) to criticize historical novels, they countered “*if you write a novel, you don’t have to be accurate at all*” (DG1). Some participants even questioned the authenticity of accounts of history more broadly, which led to a troubling valorization of fictitious accounts. Readers recognized that a novel aims to tell a story and may ignore historical details; as one reader comments: “[*Sarah Thornhill*] *is put in a setting that is devoid of specific historical detail. So that you can’t point to it and say well that wouldn’t have happened then, or... there*” (DG1). Some readers considered the ‘simple language’ of the novel gave the characters’ authenticity, and reflected saying “*it is not trying to be sophisticated or smart or anything, which is how they spoke really—it is how they spoke in those days*”. In this instance, the reader’s appreciation of the novel’s authenticity reveals assumptions about historical language and speech patterns that others found contrived. Some readers were initially “*uncomfortable [with] the style*” (FG2) or annoyed by the language devices, as they invoked a kind of cultural cringe. This perceived lapse of historical authenticity (or political correctness)

11 Quotations from participants are given without any identifiers except DG and FG to indicate whether the comments were made during a discussion or focus group, respectively. Numbers indicate whether the group was from Melbourne (1 or 2) or Tasmania (3). When more than one respondent is reported as part of a sequence, letters are used to indicate different speakers.

was ultimately excused by an engrossing plot, as one explains: “*it ended up that I got used to the phrasing but I didn’t like the way she was trying to embody the character as illiterate, and what she was trying to do with the phrasing*” (DG2).

Readers also engaged in sense-making around characters’ actions. The realism and “*humanness*” (DG1) of the characters was a strong theme in the discussion groups, and readers considered characters’ motivations, misunderstandings, fears, and foibles. One described how “*Sarah had flaws, and she confessed to that. I mean, we found out about her good and her bad side.*” Another agreed saying, “*that was good. She was very real*” (DG1). The readers connected with the characters in the novel; and readers focused on whether characters’ behaviour was realistic. One reader noted that “*even if you didn’t like [a character], you had ... some feelings for them*” (FG1).

Participants indicated that uncertainty about motivations does not necessarily detract from the authenticity of characters. If readers are unsure why a character acts in a particular way, for example acting rashly, or out of guilt, this is often taken to be more indicative of understandable emotions, or the human condition, than a mischaracterization by the author. For example, members of FG1 questioned the seemingly modern behaviour of Sarah, in travelling alone to New Zealand. This sense of *understanding* the character allowed the readers to enter into the diegesis, resulting in an emotional response to the story:

I mean, oddly enough it was very moving, and it was shocking, what happened to [Sarah’s niece]. ... I found the depiction of that more personally, emotionally affecting, emotionally, than the actual Aboriginal atrocity that took place at the end of *Secret River*, And to me, that was like a – interesting that we humans are – we can get more bound up in the death of one person than we can in the death of thousands of people. (DG1)

This final quotation provides a useful link to the second theme of interest, *self-reflexivity*, by which we mean the process through which readers use narrative to reflect on themselves and their lives.

Participants considered reading historical fiction as a “doorway” into history:

it is different reading it in a novel versus reading it in a newspaper versus reading it in a history book. You relate to the characters in a different way, you are more willing to interact with the characters ... [it takes you into the history] yeah, it takes you in, gives you that doorway. (DG1)

As readers discussed the facts of history, they actively reflected on the significance of these for themselves and for others: both in the past and in contemporary social relations. Readers’ responses, and the subsequent discussions that book clubs generate, go beyond a *literary* analysis of authenticity. They represent a form of active engagement that we refer to as *reflexivity*, which spans

a continuum from a very personal level of engagement (“what this means for me”) to a social level (the implications for Australian society).

With reflections of a personal nature, readers appreciated how the story gave a “*very interesting*” account of a particular period and provoked emotional reactions and also a desire, as one reader put it, to “*know more about your [own] family history, what your heritage is*” (FG2). With reflections on a more social level, readers began to appreciate the implications of the story, and display emotions in relation to it. Such engagement might lead some to articulate the need for injustice to be acknowledged (a key theme in the novel) and the elusiveness of recognition and restitution. On an individual level, reading and discussion prompted personal reminiscence. One participant commented: “*I really loved to read something that is Australian. It is really nice to read your own history or hear your own stories*” (FG2). Readers would remember events from their own experiences, as the following illustrates:

I was talking before about—my grandmother grew up on a station, Ceduna—and how ... [Grenville] was describing life on an isolated farm, with Daunt. And I was just getting mixed up in my head with my grandmother’s stories [you could visualize it] yeah, and really feel it. (FG2)

Readers reflecting in this way often expressed a desire to find out more about their family histories, or to reconnect with relatives across Australia, before the stories were “*lost*” (FG2).

Active reflection also happened in a wider sense with readers engaging with contemporary social issues around race relations. For example, readers wanted to get at the truth of Australian history; as one commented: “*why didn’t people write about it [Australian history], why is it not on TV, why is our history buried, basically. Apart from Ned Kelly and the gold rush there is basically nothing there, there is absolutely nothing there*” (FG2). The broader reflections on the past, and on contemporary relations with Indigenous Australians, included assertions that injustice should be recognized, and yet also that recognition was elusive, and restitution almost irresolvably complex. During a lengthy discussion of Indigenous disadvantage, one woman made a comment which reflected on how the book appeared to explicitly invoke contemporary race relations, saying:

I am probably a bit weary and wary and cautious about indigenous issues. You know, and I am very unconfident that any of us have any real solutions to it, so I was cautious with the book, you know. But then I was commenting on it in the discussion that I was quite satisfied by where it went, and impressed with Kate Grenville. ... Ok, I’m not posing any solutions but it is important to talk about it and keep the stories open and alive and you do need to know what has happened (FG2).

This reflects how book club members read *Sarah Thornhill* as a way to engage with current debates around reconciliation, and how the historical novel has

value as an educative tool in Australia, even if this did not extend to thinking about addressing contemporary issues in a concrete way.

Readers born overseas had a different kind of experience that contrasted with those born in Australia; it was not their history, and they explicitly stated that they felt less implicated. For a Swedish-born reader the book group discussion broadened her worldview: “*They [the Australian-born readers] find something I didn’t, you know it really does something for me because you can hear what other people think, hear them disagreeing, raising things that I would not have thought of*”. (FG2)

Reflections on contemporary race relations as a result of the novel were not so much evidence of ‘changed’ thinking, but engagement with the plot and characters was a window to understanding contemporary imaginings. Statements like the above, suggest that reading *Sarah Thornhill* enabled readers in our study to implicate themselves in history; as Australians, and as participants in and witnesses to the ‘silencing’ of history that is such a dominant feature of hegemonic discourses of the nation’s past.

Reading and discussing historical fiction has the power to evoke the past, and act as a doorway to appraise the impact of past events. This idea has particular resonance in postcolonial cultures, such as Australia. Insofar as postcolonial literary theory promotes the power of political literature to inspire social reflection and change, then it is necessary to understand how the ‘reading publics’ of postcolonial cultures use their readings of postcolonial literature. This is to say, any postcolonial literary theory must appreciate vernacular literary criticism. In her book *Postcolonial Theory*, Leela Gandhi suggests that “the colonial aftermath calls for an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past.”¹² For some postcolonial literary scholars, such a theory entails developing reading practices that facilitate readers’ reckoning with the past through the medium of fiction. However one understands the role of fiction in the postcolonial refashioning of national historical narratives towards reconciliation, the reading subject of such theory is generally assumed to be an academic reader: a reader who occupies a position within or in relation to formal, usually tertiary, educational institutions; not unlike the theorists who posit such views in the first place. An unintended consequence of this is that the vernacular criticism of ordinary readers is elided, ignored, discounted, or rendered suspect. This oversight is a clear challenge to many assumptions of postcolonial theory, and it is one that is being addressed by researchers such as Kimberly Chabot Davis¹³, and James Procter and Bethan

12 GANDHI 1998, p. 8.

13 CHABOT DAVIS 2014.

Benwell¹⁴, who have investigated how book clubs can facilitate discourses of intercultural engagement and rapprochement. Our study contributes to these efforts.

The vernacular criticism observed in relation to *Sarah Thornhill* works in two key ways: first, readers seem to hold in tension a critique of the accounts of history and yet accept its provisional nature, or fictitious elements. Second, in terms of active reflection, readers engage through group discussion with historical fiction on a continuum from personal reminiscence to a deeper level of appreciation for the implications of history and story. This response to a novel includes considerations of the implications of history on self, on the Australian “story” or legacy, and on the present social context of Indigenous Australians. For the readers in our study, *Sarah Thornhill* thus became a highly accessible means to stimulate critical thinking about the events of the past and their relevance for the present.

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14 PROCTER/BENWELL 2014.

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ISBN Print: 9783847113232 – ISBN E-Lib: 9783737013239