

Who Will Have Come to Have Read This?

—In Memory of Niall Lucy (1956-2014)

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I wonder what the chances were (they must have been astronomical) against it being you, wherever you are, you of all people, who should happen to be reading this right now. Try as I might to nullify the mystery of this chance event (*I am but a publishing function, you are just a sale*), still I can't get over the absolute improbability that at this very moment it is you, out of everyone, who is reading me. At *this* very moment, *you*. Needless to say, you arouse my curiosity, though of course the chances are that we will never meet and nothing else will pass between us. (*Beyond*, 1)

Before and beyond every other theme or idea perhaps, the issues raised in and by the work of Niall Lucy—Professor of Critical Theory, Founding Co-Editor of *Ctrl-Z*, colleague and friend—have concerned the problem of reading. Not simply as theme, but perhaps most importantly as form of address, the questions of who might read what is written, and *how*, visibly mark the many books and articles that Niall wrote over the last three decades or more.

Apart from its other possible functions, for instance, the stated aim of Niall's first monograph, *Debating Derrida* (1995), was 'to encourage people to read the work of Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida' (ix)—a figure whose own readings of the traditions of Western philosophy and literature (and more besides) formed the basis of much of Niall's writing (see, especially, *Derrida*). A superb introduction to Derrida's ideas, that debut certainly taught me how to read Derrida, and in such a way as to appreciate the power and brilliance of his critical thought. But more than just a reading of Derrida, Niall's first book also offered an early move in his ongoing reading of the possibilities of reading.

In publishing terms, that is, an introductory text such as *Debating Derrida* (perhaps) is understood to recount the fundamentals and ongoing issues of a subject area for an uninitiated readership. But beyond its content, or rather as an effect of that content, one of the less obvious functions of such texts is to communicate to its readers an idea of *how* to read, to convey some notion of the form in which it makes sense to *make sense* of (and in) that field. To the extent that such texts usually proceed by identifying key concepts and providing detached overviews, they thereby train their readers to understand their subject areas in those same terms, isolating general methods, say, and defining the core principles of this or that philosophical system.

By contrast, in that first book—the very antithesis of 'deracinated'—Niall sought to introduce 'the prior location of Derrida's work in the world, around which there exist fully formed opinions of its philosophical and political values' (*Debating*, xi). As thus located, the Derrida presented in that work is one whose ideas and arguments are bound to the contexts from which they emerge. Indeed, 'there would be ... [no] point in pretending to introduce a "pure" form of Derrida's philosophy', for 'the only "proper" form of Derrida that *can* be introduced ... is the double form of a "Derrida" who is both a subject and an object of debate' (ibid.).

Likewise Niall's second book: *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1997), which, in 'introducing' the 'fields' of postmodern literature and literary theory, approached those forms of writing as 'problems' which themselves 'present the problem of how to approach them' (*Postmodern*, xi). How is one to read a book that treats the task of reading (it) as a problem in the first place?

Such a concern to engage the problem of reading, both theoretically and practically, can give little comfort to commercial publishers, dependent as the latter are on categories of *readership*, which may in turn be imagined as 'target markets'. If an introductory text challenges the (disciplinary, pedagogical) work of 'introduction', that is, it inevitably calls into question the type of reader for whom such work is commissioned and written. Across Niall's many books, such interrogation has taken the guise not just of quasi-philosophical reflections on a concept of 'the reader' but also of bold performances of rhetorical challenge, his most audacious, perhaps, being the introduction to his anthology of key works in postmodern literary theory:

About a third of the way through one of Kathy Acker's novels, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), there appears a drawing (styled after the genre of lavatory graffiti) of— and let's get the grammar right—a cunt. A wide-open beaver. A full-page legs-apart close-up of a pussy. ('On the Way', 1).

The conceptual work—indeed, genius—of this opening sentence is arguably enacted in its parenthetical interjection ('and let's get the grammar right'), but there's little doubt that its daring lies in the choice of concluding noun ('cunt'). Read in the context of the discussion that follows it, this opening move seems an entirely suitable entrée into the field it introduces, yet in the context of commercial and academic publishing it could only strike an editor as a monumental act of self-sabotage, a move destined to alienate the book's reader from the get go. Given this clash of proprieties—perfect correspondence between style (signifier) and content (signified) versus incongruity between mode of address and institutional addressee—we might ask whether postmodern literary theory could ever be *read* by a reader who would be so alienated. Alternatively, we could consider whether such alienation may function as a quasi-condition, on the basis of which the reading of postmodern literary theory might find its chance to begin.

In these contrasting queries, we can see at least two competing ways for conceiving of readers for the kind of critical and conceptual writing that has secured for itself a rather bad name in certain sections of the academic world. On the one hand, for the critics of postmodern theory (as well as, perhaps, for some its proponents) the outrageousness of that writing's forms of rhetoric and apparent frivolity serve purely as an alibi for the putative impossibility of capturing the mystery of their elusive content, which therefore is destined to remain unread, *except*—and this is the bit that really gets the anti-pomo brigade's goats—by the already initiated. In this scenario, 'deconstruction', 'postmodernism', 'continental philosophy', or simply 'theory', are but the names of pseudo-intellectual cliques who take only delight from the inability of 'outsiders' to comprehend their games and their fictions. In contrast to the cynicism driving such accounts, it is common enough to insist, on the other hand, on the intellectually demanding nature of the work that is produced within these speculative fields. What such works presuppose of their readers, on this account, is a keenness of mind and the very heights of philosophical rigour.

But aren't these two scenarios simply different sides of the same coin? For what is 'philosophical rigor' if not also a shibboleth distinguishing another established community of readers? The function of interpellation (to borrow, for a moment, from an older language) that speaks through the institutions of academic publishing seems untroubled by the difference between *this* readership and *that*. So long as the publication in question invites potential readers to recognise themselves as a part of its target market—or, if not, then as part of the target market for some other, 'competing title'—the machinery of the publishing industry and the disciplines of the academy carry on just fine.

A third possibility, however, becomes increasingly visible in the books Niall produced in the later years of his academic life: *The War on Democracy* (2006, with Steve Mickler), *Vagabond Holes* (2009, co-edited by Chris Coughran), *Pomo Oz* (2010) and *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe* (2012, with John Kinsella). It is in

these books, which cross generic boundaries, disciplinary divides, and publishing distinctions between 'academic' and 'general' readerships, that the question of 'how to read' becomes most emphatic. For such works, trampling as they do over established writing and publishing categories, seem not to speak to a specific readership so much as call one into being, producing for themselves the kind of reader that is otherwise wanting, even unimaginable, in the world of commercial publishing.

Who will have come to have read *The War on Democracy*, for instance, a book that engages with the language and figures of Australian public life, as much as those of the humanities academy, and so seeks 'general' readerships for 'specialist' research? Who will have come to have read *Pomo Oz*, which takes post-structuralist theory, critical thought and the Australian tradition of 'taking the piss', and applies them to the task of engaging with popular media texts and topical public-political issues?

Or again: what kind of a reader might result from *Vagabond Holes*, a collection of commissioned pieces on the musician David McComb and his band The Triffids? If this book can be easily mistaken at first sight (say, on the 'new titles' shelves of an independent book store) for a rock biography, that status is flatly denied in Niall's introduction to the tome:

This book is not a rock biography. It doesn't feign to tell the story of David McComb's life, or to explain his music as an expression of that story. It doesn't seek to psychologize McComb by construing some eventful moment in his childhood as the talismanic source of meaning in his songs. While several pieces here are clearly biographical or historical in nature, these are no more imperative than other—fictional, poetic, speculative, critical or variously visual—inclusions. (*Vagabond*, 13)

Notwithstanding this emphatic denial, there's little doubt that the bulk of the book's readership will have turned out to consist of fans of David McComb, The Triffids, and 'alternative rock' more generally, rather than philosophers, professional academics, specialist readers of poetry, art appreciationists, and so forth. Will these 'non-academic' readers consider themselves dupes—tricked by disingenuous authors and unscrupulous marketing into buying a book of nonsense—or will they have come to appreciate the many 'other ways of looking at the topic' of David McComb (ibid.) that the book hopes to convey? Of course, if that book could be said to have taught at least some of its readers how to read it, the lesson it would thereby convey is that there's no reason to believe that music fans can't *also* be philosophers, can't *also* be poetry readers or cultural critics...hence no reason *to write* as though readers can only be one or the other.

Hence, too, *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe*, which combines poetry with philosophy, biography with fiction, contemporary cultural criticism with genuine historical research into Joseph Bolitho Johns, a petty criminal who became marginally famous for his multiple escapes from Western Australian prisons across the 1860s. One of Niall's more substantial contributions to the volume is a 14,000 word essay, 'Moondyne Joe, As If...', which tells a version of the bushranger's life that blends fact with fiction, analysis with speculation, literary interpretation with postcolonial critique. Beyond this 'eclecticism' of its 'styles', the very marginality of its subject matter also raises the question of readership. For the figure of Moondyne Joe, notwithstanding his status as Western Australia's best known bushranger, could hardly be expected to guarantee a book's place on the best-sellers list. In defiance of such expectations of unmarketability, then, the very *conception* of the 'book' (scarcely the right term) underscores the fact that 'market' interest must (or at least may) be *generated* as much as it might be catered for. In this very real, very pragmatically consequential sense—if only for Fremantle Press, the publishers who chose to back the 'project'—the reader of *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe* would have to have been understood, at the moment of its writing, as very much remaining to come. Who will (have) come, in other words, to acquire this desire to read about a barely known figure, as sketched from such eclectic and unconventional perspectives?

More importantly, what will that reader be (or have been) inspired *to think*?

In all of Niall's books, from *Debating Derrida* to *The Ballad of Moondyne Joe*, the continuing, and continually acknowledged, source of inspiration lies in the manifold works of Derrida. Undoubtedly, in its style as much

as in its content, Niall's writing owes a significant debt to Derrida's own writings, but Niall's remittance does not quite take the form of imitation that Derrida's 'disciples' are often charged with having taken. Desiring to mimic or perform neither the 'transgressive' 'unreadability' nor the 'philosophical complexity' of its source of inspiration, Niall's writing strives, instead, to *cultivate* the kind of reading subject that would, simply, be 'up' to reading that writing, hence the kind of reader who would be 'up' to thinking the important, unconventional, transformative thoughts it explores.

And so it turns out that it's not just 'introductory texts' that teach their readers how to read. The same might be said of all books—certainly all of Niall's books—though the degree to which each performs this pedagogical function via the very transformation of its readers is undoubtedly variable.

At any rate, if, as is often demanded by the conventions of whatever genre of writing this piece here turns out to have been (memorial? review? research essay?), we must isolate some central theme or problem as a recurring feature of Niall's work, some form of 'continuum' (see 'Introduction'), and thereby do that work an injustice that calls for endless reparation, we could do worse than choosing to identify that theme here as the *challenge* of reading. Across his work, evident in different ways and to varying degrees, it is the persistent rejection of the *identity* of 'the' reader that stands out as a defining feature—one among many others, no doubt—of Niall's written accomplishments. His writing seems always to have aspired towards producing in its readers more sophisticated and more significant forms of transformation than might be expected of many academic publications. In having proceeded from such aspirations, his books continue to offer not simply new arguments 'about' some issue or idea or figure, but most importantly new ways of approaching those objects, new ways of reading the fields and the world in which those objects may appear, new ways of making sense of 'making sense'.

For Niall's writing to continue to work towards that goal, the thing it requires above all is, simply, new flesh-and-blood readers. In the wake of his death, as both the sales of his books and the impact of his name as a publishing function inevitably diminish, it is the modest aim of this brief, all too readerly memorial to his life and work merely to encourage people to read the work of Australian-born critical theorist and founding Co-Editor of *Ctrl-Z* Niall Lucy.

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[< Contents](#)

[< Close Issue](#)