

**Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver, *Colonial Australian Fiction: Character Types, Social Formations and the Colonial Economy*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2017. 153pp  
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*Colonial Australian Fiction: Character Types, Social Formations and the Colonial Economy* (2017), by Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver, is published within the Sydney University Press' Sydney Studies in Australian Literature series, which aims to reinvigorate the study of Australian literature both locally and internationally. Gelder and Weaver combine their expertise in Australian literary studies to produce a rich study of character types in colonial Australian fiction, including how these types evolve and mutate over time and reveal what was taking place in colonial Australian society, especially in terms of structures of power, influence, and the economic landscape. This book adds to Gelder and Weaver's already significant contribution to reviving interest in the rich archive of colonial Australian fiction and what it reveals about Australia's history and continually evolving sense of national and cultural identity.

*Colonial Australian Fiction* examines character types such as squatters, bushrangers, detectives, shepherds, swagmen, the city larrikin, the dandy and the Australian girl. Each type is considered through a range of texts including novels, poetry, short stories, and newspaper articles. The scope of authors is broad, comprising Australian and international writers, both well-known and more obscure. Authors as diverse as Catherine Helen Spence, Rosa Praed, Henry Kingsley, Rolf Boldrewood, Anthony Trollope, Barbara Baynton, Marcus Clarke, Mary Fortune, and Hume Nisbet are included. The writers are not always Australian—indeed, some only visited the country briefly, such as William Howitt; others, such as Samuel Sydney, did not come to Australia at all. Alongside these diverse voices, Gelder and Weaver connect the development of colonial Australian fiction to what was taking place in Europe. Many of the texts explored in the book appeared in Charles Dickens' weekly magazine *Household Words*, for example, exposing colonial Australia and its culture to an international audience. The discussion further demonstrates the significant role that the burgeoning print media played in distributing Australian fiction to a wide reading public, both nationally and internationally.

In their introduction, Gelder and Weaver trace the interest in character types that grew out of studies in ethnology and physiognomy, which saw fictional human characters classified as differentiated 'species' with certain signifying dispositions. They discuss the earliest appearance of character types and genres, including the first squatter novel, Thomas McCombie's *Adventures of a Colonist; or, Godfrey Arabin, the Settler* (1845) and John Lang's *The Forger's Wife* (1855), which they argue is the first detective novel in Australia. They also draw connections between writers, demonstrating how particular texts inform and draw on each other—for example, the influence of Rolf Boldrewood on Hume Nisbet—as well as contrasting representations of character types by comparing Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1889) with Rosa Praed's *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893). Gelder and Weaver demonstrate the ways in which character types merge and change across genres and through time, reflecting changes in society and the economy. They explore character types through the genres in which they proliferate: the squatter novel, colonial detective fiction, the bushranger romance, the swagman's tale and the Australian girl's romance. Themes common to colonial Australia underpin the discussion: the space of the frontier; land ownership; class; pastoral ideology; separation of city and bush. Not unexpectedly, *Colonial Australian Fiction* reveals pivotal characters who are by and large Anglo-Australian men. Women and Indigenous Australians

and other minority groups are marginalised, although they are not ignored in Gelder and Weaver's discussion. Social acceptability and mobility are explored through particular character types, such as the Swagman, who is analysed as a post-settlement figure excluded from the escalating project of nation-building, raising the question of how far outside the boundaries of 'civilisation' can character type go before they become irredeemable (61). By probing character types and the ways they function in colonial Australian literature in a sustained way, the book shows how easily recognisable character types elicit more nuanced features over time, not quite fulfilling expectations and/or even contradicting them. Character types 'assemble and disassemble,' demonstrating how any definitive national type remains elusive.

The latter half of the nineteenth century when many of these character types emerged and proliferated, was a transformational period in the nation, politically and economically. Gelder and Weaver structure their exploration in terms of the colonial economy, which they understand, in broad terms, 'as an entire network of transactions and investments to do with land purchase and infrastructure, financial speculation and enterprise, labour, manufacturing and productivity, the accumulation of wealth and the circulation of capital' (1). They argue that the various character types generated in colonial Australian fiction engaged with the economy in certain ways, reflecting power structures and views of society at the time. A widely recognised character such as the Squatter is initially presented as an idealised figure, but the many variations of this type show how the Squatter figure transformed and fragmented as other characters came to prominence. Similarly, the emergence of the Detective as an agent for the nation (and set apart from the generic police constable) is interrogated; and the currency lass is replaced over time by the 'native-born' (and modern) Australian girl. These meta-characters and their more deviant offshoots provide compelling commentary on colonial Australian society.

By examining minor and eccentric characters alongside prominent character types that drive narratives in distinct ways, *Colonial Australian Fiction* uncovers how character types fragment and operate with and against each other. Gelder and Weaver contend that social types present a picture of contemporary humanity and society while also 'frustrating this purpose, unravelling the possibility of being comprehensive by the sheer fact of their proliferation' (4). As they also point out, in a wide-ranging examination such as this, across many texts and genres, 'it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain any coherent sense of a type who could properly be said to represent the interplay of the colonies at large' (136). The interplay between major and minor character types in colonial Australian fiction, the contradictory dispositions they display, and the social fracturing that invariably sees certain types excluded from the national paradigm, demonstrate the difficult-to-pin-down nature of a distinct national identity. *Colonial Australian Fiction* is a useful resource for readers wanting to deepen their understanding of the many ways fictional character types function, particularly in the formation of the Australian nation and its literature.

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