

**Sue Sheridan. *The Fiction of Thea Astley*.
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Sue Sheridan's *The Fiction of Thea Astley* is the latest addition to a recent group of monographs on modern Australian authors, such as studies of Shirley Hazzard, Brian Castro, and Murray Bail. For this welcome and overdue attention we can largely thank Susan Lever's editorship of Cambria's Australian Literature series. Sheridan's study is also part of a renewed interest in Astley, joining Paul Genoni and Sheridan's 2006 edited collection of essays, *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds*, and Karen Lamb's 2015 biography. A monograph on Astley is similarly overdue, as I agree with Sheridan's assessment that Astley, regardless of her four Miles Franklin awards, is a major yet underrated Australian author. Like her protagonists, Astley is something of an outsider or a belated addition to the Australian literary tradition and to accounts of Australian women's writing. Being a Queenslander—like Astley, I hate to revert to type and play the geography card—I suspect that Astley's actual and imagined state of origin, and her fictional terrain of Queensland, do play some part in her literary otherness.

With her position as preeminent feminist critic of Australian women's writing, including studies of Christina Stead and post-war Australian women writers, Sheridan is the ideal scholar to explore the uniqueness of Astley and why she 'was one of the outstanding fiction writers of the twentieth century' (1). Sheridan hopes that the book will '[confirm] her reputation as a major novelist, encouraging readers familiar with her work to revisit it and reconsider her lifelong achievement, and [lead] a whole new generation of readers to enter her imaginative world, to be moved and informed by it' (3). Sheridan aims to highlight Astley's role as literary innovator, a modernist who emphasises style, form, and word play over character and plot to bring her largely North Queensland settings to life. Accordingly, Sheridan draws parallels with Patrick White and William Faulkner, leading me (and hopefully readers) to reconsider who might be the great white novelist of Queensland, and the leading Australian modernists.

Sheridan performs a feminist and postcolonially inflected reading of all of Astley's novels and novellas, thereby producing the definitive study of Astley's oeuvre. This reading position and the organisation of the book emphasise Astley's political and stylistic development. Sheridan's style is highly readable and engaging: literary and political theory are adeptly handled while not being overly simplified; succinct summaries of novels mean that readers don't have to have read every novel for the analysis to be accessible; the grouping of texts within chapters keeps the argument focused and dynamic.

The introduction contextualises Astley: her Catholic upbringing, Brisbane childhood, work as a country school teacher, and relocation to Sydney, as well as her core literary techniques of discontinuous narrative, 'the explosive moment,' irony, satire, compressed language, and disconsolate narrators. Here Sheridan outlines Astley's (not uncritical) loyalty to her Queensland identity, namely, her own sense of otherness. As a consequence, throughout the book Sheridan foregrounds the ways in which Astley fictionalises North Queensland as geographical, political, and metaphysical space, making this one of the book's strengths. It brings to life the physical beauty and ugliness, the colonial and patriarchal violence, and the multiple effects of small towns/small-mindedness explored by Astley, including her groundbreaking narratives of Indigenous and white interaction. Sheridan argues that Astley is 'not so much interested in shaping historical details into a narrative as in the emotional dynamics of

colonial racism' (139). Pleasingly, Astley's black humour is given proper space as well; as Sheridan concludes: 'Her continuous experimentation with form is always energized by her unique capacity to crosscut tragedy with humor of a particularly dark, witty, and outrageous kind' (157).

The seven chapters, while following a loosely chronological structure, focus on stylistic and formal turning points, discussing two or three novels per chapter. The opening chapter, 'A Study in Emotions' details Astley's use of satire in her first three novels (*Girl with a Monkey*, *A Descant for Gossips*, and *The Slow Natives*) to represent women's experiences of post-World War Two suburbia and small town life, in effect producing "a study in emotions"—the emotions of "insignificant people performing routine tasks" (Astley qtd. in Sheridan 17). Chapter two, 'I needed a narrator,' examines *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962) and *The Acolyte* (1972) in terms of Astley's turn to using first person narration to produce these portraits of male egotism and privilege. Chapter three, 'Colonial Encounters,' similarly features two temporally distant works: *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968) and *Beachmasters* (1985) to demonstrate the increasing complexity of Astley's engagement with colonialism—Australian and Pacific. Indeed, Sheridan's major thesis is that Astley's work became increasingly political—in feminist and in postcolonial terms, as well as technically more assured. The last chapter, on Astley's final two novels *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* and *Drylands*, therefore positions them as the culmination of Astley's work: using all her stylistic innovations 'to achieve miracles of compression with metaphorical language' so as 'to unsettle the certainties and satisfactions of settler-colonial Australia' (151), a space and time that for Astley is also brutally patriarchal.

The book's conclusion positions Astley in a larger historico-literary frame, one delineated by J.M. Coetzee's South Africa and William Faulkner's South. Sheridan argues that Astley, like Coetzee and Faulkner, had to rethink the novel form to be able to reimagine her landscapes and small towns, and the violence underpinning them. But Astley's is a labour of love too: her works 'are an expression of love for a place, and a mode of inhabiting that space which could be so much better than it is' (156). Sheridan is also at pains to show that Astley's conceit of 'Queensland' is one not safely restricted to north of the Tweed River.

The Fiction of Thea Astley is a major addition to Australian literary studies and feminist literary studies. It achieves its aims of demonstrating Astley's literary innovation and political force, and does make the reader want to return to Astley's North Queensland—but not in summer. Just one final quibble, and it's not about typos. Given that Astley is a writer who gave us such evocative titles (*It's Raining in Mango*, for instance), maybe the book deserves a more descriptive and colourful title to complement the wonderful cover photograph of Astley looking coolly modern—as only a Queenslander can.

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