

Feature

MACQUARIE PEN ANTHOLOGY OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE.

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A milestone in Australian publishing history the 1,400 page **Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature** is a veritable doorstopper. Covering all genres – from fiction, poetry and drama to diaries, letters, essays and autobiographies – the **Anthology** maps the formation of the Australian voice from its colonial infancy to the current literary scene.

The motivation? In 2003 PEN

*joined the chorus of concern that Australian literature was losing its place in bookshops, on publisher's lists, in classrooms.*

The response? 513 pieces from 307 authors, two kilograms heavy and built for rough handling.

The **Anthology** functions primarily as a reference text. It includes an excellent series of introductory notes organised into five genre and era chapters. The entries and extracts are ordered chronologically from the author's year of birth to form an historical and literary timeline. Biographical data and literary critiques accompany each author. A glossary and index are also included.

While I can't envisage the **Anthology** replacing the Internet as the main go-to source for teachers researching texts to use in the classroom, Macquarie's effort has provided the intertextual connections – *'the affinities, oppositions, echoes and comparisons'* – that readers and teachers need to find in order for the parts to make sense within the whole. Users can move fluently from extract to extract as most complement and enhance each other. Compare for instance Barron Field's wondrous, declamatory 1819 poem *The Kangaroo* in which the marsupial in all its glory is likened to a whole host of mythical creatures

*Sphinx or mermaid realiz'd, or centaur unfabulous, would scarce be more prodigious, or Labyrinthine Minotaur, or Pegasus poetical, or hippogriff – chimeras all!*

to its use as a cultural metaphor in Alan Marshall's short story *The Grey Kangaroo* where a female kangaroo is brought down by a pack of dogs within the helpless sight of an old prospector. Eve Langley's poem *Native Born*, where a dead kangaroo metaphorically assumes the persona of a dead Aboriginal woman, also makes an appearance in the same section.

Most anthologies of this magnitude begin at Federation. It is evident in the first 200 pages that the editors intended to leave no stone unturned. Dominated by convict writings, reports from explorers and ballads from homesick settlers, the contents and contexts are mostly about the privations of life and the harshness of the land. These early texts used language to document experience. One standout extract deals with Charles Sturt exploring the Murray and being threatened by a huge party of the local indigenous people. Sheer providence saves him, but, vigourously patriotic, he unfurls the Union Jack and gives three cheers.

For countless decades a dumping ground for criminals, the discovery of gold in 1850 heralded the end of the colonial era as immigrants, artisans and merchants formed a new working class. Lawlessness was still present as witnessed by Ellen Clacy in the goldfields

*murder here – murder there – revolvers cracking – blunderbusses bombing – rifles going off – balls whistling – a party of bacchanals chanting various ditties to different time and tune, or rather minus both*

but so too a continuing disregard for authority. Bushrangers were regaled in ballads and Rolf Boldrewood defiantly broke tradition when he wrote **Robbery Under Arms** from a robber's point of view. His impish, impudent extract can be compared to Ned Kelly's taunting, libellous, unpunctuated jeer at policemen and the English in his *Jerilderie Letter*.

Loaded with classical and rhetorical allusion the early poets strove to extol our country's European heritage. This too began to change. Earthy sketches of 'bush types' narrated in colloquial first person began to emerge. The **Anthology** includes better known writers such as Henry Lawson but also A.J. Boyd, C.J. Dennis and Steele Rudd. These quintessentially Australian pastorals on town and country life map out the human foibles of the squatter. Drawn from the same era are the feminist writings of Louisa Lawson, Barbara Baynton and Mary Gilmore. Addressing social issues such as domestic violence, racial prejudice and the sexual abuse of women they make a startling counterpoint.

The Australia evoked in writing from the turn of the twentieth century is close enough to our own time to be familiar and yet frames and enacts a history we weren't part of – the First World War, the Great

Depression, the Menzies era and its accompanying cultural cringe. We encounter an attempt at a national voice, yet a literature so diverse as to be conflicted.

Outback yarns still crystallised for many readers the myth of a laconic, yet adventurous, pioneering rural Australia but much of the writing was consciously modern. Miles Franklin's heroine Sybylla, for instance, still resonates today as a self-willed, impetuous and unchastened teenager.

Kenneth Slessor marks a pivotal transition in the world of poetry. At home with populist themes such as the swimsuited *Backless Betty from Bondi* he also explored classical themes of time, memory and alienation. Post-war poetry became minimalist and edgy. It focused on the particular and the everyday with a sharper sense of social commentary. Epistles on working class concerns sit alongside caustic satires on suburbia while political poetry from Aboriginal writers such as Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Charles Perkins deal with issues of social recognition and social injustice.

Indeed there is a new wave of counterculture expression. Realism and the extensive use of Australian speech patterns and idioms make their appearance in the generation-gap texts *The One Day of The Year* and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Also included is Donald Horne's autobiographical piece where, imbued to respect the solid sacrament of the Anzac legend, young Horne reflects that not many of the Australian icons he has been told to admire carry much personal weight or relevance!

After the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s Australian writers began to look back on history and re-evaluate our cultural lore. David Malouf in a number of short stories examines the race relations that emerged from Australian settlement, Geoffrey Blainey, the myths of the Eureka Stockade, and Robert Hughes, our Anglo-centricity and the absurdity of this policy in a multicultural society. Less engaged with the immediate concerns of Australian public and political life and increasingly retrospective, the dominance of the historical novel in the ensuing decades is reflected in the names that begin to emerge: Peter Carey, Roger McDonald, Tim Winton, Thomas Keneally and Kate Grenville. Apart from *The True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Schindler's List* there are no extracts from their seminal historical novels, however, and only in this sense did I find the *Anthology* under-represented. It may have been a copyright issue.

Due to space limitations this is, of course, only a brief overview. The *Macquarie Anthology* is a BIG, BIG work. The more I browsed, the more authors

I stumbled across that I'd heard of but never read. Many were no longer in print. Out of sheer bloodmindedness I tried to think of a writer who wasn't covered in the index but failed miserably.

I urge the editors of future editions to avoid using the same type face and font for all the extracts. The poetry and drama texts look like prose as a result. The drama texts in particular could do with double spacing so they look more like conventional scripts.

All things considered the *Macquarie Anthology* is a phenomenal achievement and well worth its \$70 hardback price as a compendium and reference tool for teachers. A word of warning however. This is a literary collection and does not contain genre fiction or genre authors.

The *Macquarie Anthology* is accompanied by a very useful Teaching Guide CD and a DVD containing 15 interview clips.

The Teaching Guide comprises 10 units focussing on a range of themes and issues pitched for Lower to Middle and Upper Secondary classes. Structured in blocks of 14-16 lessons some of the thematic and genre units are a little ambitious but there is also much to like. Someone knows what they are doing here.

Unit 5 is aimed at Year Ten. It focuses on how authors draw on and use the distinctive Australian landscape in their work, and how the land is used to represent aspects of the individual or collective self. Key authors include A.D. Hope, Dorothea MacKellar and Judith Wright. Unit 6 looks at the tensions of family life as a recurrent motif in fiction and how writers use form to explore the subject of family relationships, while Unit 8 focuses on the experiences of alienation and exclusion from communities and mainstream national cultures.

Each unit has 15 pages of student activities, key questions and useful visual resource websites. The Icon unit, for instance, pitched at Years Eight and Nine, includes group work revolving around John Williamson's song *True Blue*, Banjo Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda*, and an examination of artistic and fictional reactions to notable Australian icons such as Ned Kelly and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The activities are accompanied by specific websites.

I found the DVD less useful. Most of the interview clips are quite academic in tone although brief enough not to be too stupefying. Recognised authors such as David Malouf and Thomas Keneally are also interviewed.

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