

Brigid Rooney, *Literary Activists: Writer-intellectuals in Australian Public Life* (University of Queensland Press, 2009).

This book performs the remarkable sleight-of-mind of making its object so clear, so obvious, and so pressing that one wonders how it has not been written about before. As an exploration of the deep links between Australian society, culture, politics, and literature, this book will interest both scholars and lay readers. It has a broadly chronological structure, beginning with Patrick White and moving through Judith Wright to more recent authors, ending with Tim Winton. At the beginning, in particular, there are smooth transitions between authors, perhaps due to the stronger sense of a national literary tradition in White and Wright. The more contemporary discussion is usefully brought together in a coda.

Rooney immediately addresses what she calls the ‘decline thesis’ of Australian literature and public intellectual activity, noting the tenuousness of the Australian literary market and the shifts that have displaced the cultural capital of elite intellectuals. In fact, this latter issue is fodder for her discussion of the unique contribution made by Australian authors to intellectual life. Rooney’s introduction establishes a firm context for the rest of the book, including David Marr’s identification the pressing need for authors to ‘provide the nation’s moral compass’ (xi) as White did in *The Prodigal Son*. Rooney reflects upon Mark Latham’s labelling of urbanite cultural insiders as ‘tourists’ and suburbanite middle-Australia as ‘residents’, as well as Said’s identification of the writer as a public intellectual and David Williamson’s firm rejection of what he saw as elitist intellectualism. Authenticity as a battleground is a recurrent theme. Throughout the book, Rooney consistently eschews simplistic views of either writers as a whole or individual writers, exploring themes which ‘convey familiar national narratives that join representations of the literary writer to public life in distinctly *Australian* terms’ (xxx).

This very explicit focus on national literary intellectuals means that this book might not have so much appeal to readers of *Transnational Literature*. It is almost exclusively concerned with Australian literary culture and politics, to the almost conspicuous exclusion of any international contexts, except where they may inform topics under discussion (such as White’s Nobel Prize). This is not to say that this book is in any way parochial or limited: it is a clear boundary that Rooney marks, given the vast complexities of the issues she discusses across broad historical, cultural and intellectual climates.

Although the literary and political issues addressed are not completely unique to Australia, they are discussed in a grounded context. For instance, settler culture and a problematic sense of belonging are discussed in the figures of Judith Wright and Les Murray. This is counterbalanced by an exploration of the public cultural reception of the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and these discussions are usefully elaborated through putting Wright in discourse with White, Oodgeroo and Murray. The treatment of David Malouf’s ‘quiet diplomacy’ and attempt to forge a national sacred is particularly delicate and respectful. The city/country divide is necessarily addressed in a wide range of contexts, especially (and predictably) in White, Murray and Winton. Environmental issues gain prominence in discussions of White’s anti-nuclear

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activism, Wright's embryonic ecocritical stance, and Winton's vocal and passionate environmental activism. While these discussions are engaging and thoughtful, it is the incisive treatment of authors' engagement with intellectual culture which is the main contribution of this book.

Beyond arguing forcefully against the 'decline thesis', Rooney engages fully with what some may call the swing to the right of the Howard years. Others may consider it an anti-intellectual trend, or at least a suppression of public criticism of the Howard Government as evident in the polemics of Keith Windschuttle. However, Rooney takes a more nuanced perspective, framing the shift as a rejection of cultural and intellectual elitism which has a real and valid basis in public discourse. This takes the form of quite personal convictions, in the case of Les Murray and Helen Garner, whose creative non-fiction (especially *The First Stone*) explicitly orients itself against a supposed intellectual elite at Sydney University and represents more broadly a rebellion against institutional power. Similarly, Tim Winton's public persona shies away from 'literary' attention. Nonetheless, Rooney demonstrates quite convincingly that such authors' rejection of elite status is belied by 'a literary logic [which] works to shape and underwrite her [Garner's] mode of public intervention' (149), even if this intervention is aimed at a 'middlebrow' audience. The reading of Winton's 'literary/littoral' practice and his status as a 'shamateur' is another example of reading against the grain of authors' own proclamations.

In this respect the *Literary Activists* is self-contained and retains a strong objectivity in the face of heightened debates that threaten to compromise reasonable discussion. In particular, Rooney (herself a university academic) dispassionately analyses the strong current against elite intellectualism, putatively represented by academic culture. She does so by insisting on a consistent and well-grounded analytical framework, which for the most part is very useful for the texts and issues under discussion. However, at some points she almost seems to draw too long a bow in her aim to remain objective. For instance, when dealing with Les Murray and Helen Garner's objections to 'feminism' (framed as a totality), there is a tension in the analysis which suggests some artifice. More pointedly, the discussion of Richard Flanagan's depiction of 'the Doll' in *The Unknown Terrorist*, despite the mention of 'masculinist voyeurism' (190), is problematic. In particular, the claim that Flanagan seeks to constructively identify himself with his protagonist in order to validate mass culture might strike some as apologising for what is really a rather objectionable representation. This is less a matter of Rooney's own convictions, and more a case of the text itself being forced into a mould to fit an otherwise sound framework.

This is really the only exception (and it occurs just a few times) to what is otherwise a thorough and erudite discussion of Australian authors and their public activism. Rooney is proficient in the close reading of literary texts and highly contextualised discussions of politics, society and culture, and her considerable analytical skills are put to good use on some of the most significant and widely-read authors in Australian literature. *Literary Activists* has an important place on the bookshelves of readers who are interested in the wider contexts of literary and national cultures in Australia.

Chad Habel