

Sold by the Millions

Sold by the Millions:
Australia's Bestsellers

Edited by

Toni Johnson-Woods and Amit Sarwal

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SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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Over the past three years we have cajoled chapters out of Australia's leading scholars of popular fiction to meet the objectives of the reader so that the subjects and areas provide a wholesome picture of the wide range of reading and research options available for scholars. This is the first collection to concentrate on Australia's best-selling material that forms the armchair reading of many Australians.

We are grateful to Dr Craig Munro, Dr Alistair Rolls, Dr Kim Wilkins, and Ms Reema Sarwal for going through this manuscript and their insightful comments, observations and suggestions.

We would also like to thank all our contributors for their valuable support, suggestions, patience, and of course their articles that represent some of the best in the field of Australian popular fiction studies.

FOREWORD

AMIT SARWAL

I have never read Peter Carey, but I've read plenty of Peter Corris. [. . .]
I am the proud owner of all 79 Agatha Christie books. (Tanner 2006)

Former Labor MP Lindsay Tanner's amusingly titled review, "Pleasure between the Covers" (2006), reveals that he is a voracious reader albeit of the wrong kind of fiction. Tanner confesses that his unabashed preference for light and good "Aussie read[s] with lots of recognisable background and people," is "embarrassing," but equates it to the liberating experience of coming "out of the closet." In complete contrast are the remarks of noted Australian literary fiction writer Brian Castro in "Making Oneself Foreign":

Whenever I travel now, I stay well away from airport bookstores. I become physically ill looking at the novels on the stands. The covers take on a uniform glaze. My face is fixed in a grimace. I detect an approaching migraine. There is no specificity, no unpredictability, no absolute exceptionality. These look like books. These feel like books. But in reality they are what Gilbert Sorrentino called "bookoids." Accessories to boredom. I try to get interested in crime, in romance, in romantic crimes, in criminal romances. A wave of nausea passes through me. It seems the language in these novels has been taken out and beaten with a stick, until you have this poor flattened thing soured with plot, smelling of cheap paper, [. . .]. (9)

Such accusations are typical and undermine the power and hold of popular fiction sold at airports and railway stations. Reading these "accessories to boredom" while travelling is for Scott McCracken (1998), and many like him, amongst his "happiest experiences" as "[t]here is something about the combination of being trapped yet going somewhere that is particularly conducive to the pleasures of pulp" (1). Gelder and Salzman (2009) criticising Castro's view, note that Castro has, in a couple of his serious literary novels, drawn on the genre of spy thriller for inspiration (177-178). As Sir Walter Scott notes in his introduction to *The Fortunes of*

Nigel (1822): "I do say it, in spite of Adam Smith and his followers, that a successful author is a productive labourer, and that his works constitute as effectual a part of public wealth as that which is created by any other manufacturer" (1886: 14). So, for popular fiction to be considered a successful "culture industry" three things are of utmost importance—writer's output, distribution, and sales (see also Gelder 15).

In the last few years many scholars and publishers have come out of the literary closet and confess their interest in the ever expanding market called Australian Popular Fiction. The balance has been restored by international and independent publishers, like HarperCollins, Pan Macmillan, Hodder, Penguin, McPhee Gribble, Harlequin Mills and Boon, Bantam, Text Publishing, and Wakefield Press, who invest in Australian genre fiction. Although some popular genres, like Science Fiction and Fantasy, are not always geographically located in Australia, this only adds to their market appeal globally. As Australian writer Garth Nix (2005) observed in an interview:

They are books that travel, which means they can be sold more easily to American and British publishers than a very Australian centred novel. As a fantasy and science fiction writer you can be published all around the world, whereas writing about something very Australian about Australians may limit your audience; it is often an additional barrier you will have to hurdle. (204)

On the other hand, prominent academics and critics, like Brenda Niall (1984), Robert Dixon (1995), Stephen Knight (1997), Fiona Giles (1998), Juliet Flesch (2004), Toni Johnson-Woods (2004), and Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman (2009), have also, writing against the condescending critics of genre fiction, highlighted the Australianness in themes and language. Although the popular fiction genres, such as crime, adventure, romance, and fantasy, are only a few decades old in Australian market, they were present in a different *avatar* in colonial Australia and were part and parcel of a "thriving popular literary industry that developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia" (see Gelder et al. 2009). Journals and newspapers, such as: *The Bulletin*, the *Australian Journal*, *The Australian Town*, *The Australasian*, *The Boomerang*, the *Country Journal*, *The Long Hand*, and *The Queenslander* also played an important role in promoting these works and colonial cultural sensibilities.

Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt in their book *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy* (2005) remember an incident from the 1980s which throws some light on how Australian publishers were

advised by their English bosses not to publish and entertain popular fiction manuscripts. They write:

Back in the late 1980s, an executive of a multicultural publishing company walking into the Sydney offices and told them to stop publishing local popular fiction. Plans for a science fiction and fantasy lines quickly shelved and, for this publisher, not revisited for almost a decade. (7)

Apart from being “conservative and unused to risk-taking,” Congreve and Marquardt opine that Australian publishing industry was sidelined to take care of parent publishing companies in UK and USA (8). James Doig in his chapter in this collection notes: “A recurring theme in Australian popular publishing is that developments are invariably a response to commercial publishing trends overseas.”

Only literary fiction and children’s authors were lucky in being supported by Australian government’s publishing grants. According to renowned children’s literature author Christopher Cheng:

In many of our titles there are elements that are uniquely Australian and create a distinctly Australian voice, including the landscape, the language, the characters—even our distinctly Australian humor and vernacular. But there are many titles that do not identify with any particular Australian idiom. These books cross boundaries and could be anywhere in this world—or the other ones. (10)

These debates about the Australianness of Australian fiction often recur in academic and public spheres. Collections like *The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination* (2002), *Paper Empires* (2006) and *Making Books* (2007) have helped to shed light on the publishing and the promotion of Australian literature in 19th and 20th centuries. Katherine Bode in her chapter in this anthology explores the “complex ways in which both the novel and the industry are Janus-faced: turned to the national and the transnational, the cultural and the commercial.” She asserts that it has been the “established relationship between the novel and Australian nationalism” that “accounts for, and in recent times has been compounded by, the strong associations drawn between the fate of this fictional form, and the fate of the Australian publishing industry.” Although no one can foretell the future of any literary output, Bode concludes her argument with a positive statement: “the continual growth in Australian publishers in the last 50 years—and the difficult economic circumstances under which much of this growth has occurred—suggests that the local industry has both the will and capacity to take advantage of the current economic conditions.”

The core difficulty in promoting an Australian publishing industry was what A. A. Phillips referred to as the “cultural cringe” which is an attitude where “in the back of the Australian mind, there sits a minatory Englishman” (116-117). Pioneer Australian writers, of both literary novels and popular fiction, usually had the British publisher and reader in mind. Hsu-Ming Teo in her chapter “traces the broad influences that British literature and the British book industry has had on Australian popular fiction from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.” She explores “the empire of British book publishing and its effects on Australian book production” and British imperial influences on Australian children’s literature, men’s adventure novels and women’s romantic fiction. She concludes that while children’s and men’s popular fiction “successfully indigenised or even Americanised after the Second World War, the same was not necessarily true of the bulk women’s romance novels, even at century’s end.” The reason for this, according to Teo, were the “conditions of national and international Anglophone publishing in the twentieth century” that to a large extent “shaped Australian popular fiction in such a way that women’s romance novels remained tied to the apron strings of empire, attentive to the demands of British editors and an overseas market even as a distinctive postcolonial ‘Australianness’ was asserted.”

Today, call it a post Harry Potter phenomena, around the globe fantasy books for children and young adults have gained a huge popularity and “increase in shelf space.” Alice Mills in her chapter on Australian children’s fiction questions “why some fantasy authors for children and young adults are in the forefront of Australian literary marketing in the first decade of the twenty-first century”? She argues that this is because of “ferocity of competition for substantial awards, both monetary and in terms of literary prizes.” Taking the most popular children and young adult fantasy writer Garth Nix as her case study, Mills critically evaluates “marketing strategies that have made Nix an exception among Australian children’s writers” as the main reasons for Nix’s astonishing success. She concludes that “the marketing of Nix’s fiction can be regarded as a study in the direction Australian children’s literature, particularly fantasy fiction.”

According to Janice Radway (1991) 90% of women often read romance novels to learn about another place (60-61). And when one speaks of Australia, one is often reminded of the exotic locations, outback, the bush, the desert, the beaches and wide open spaces—the stuff that romances are made of! For overseas readers or tourists, Australian romances are an attraction as a kind of factual guidebook information—“for what they can

learn about the country.” Juliet Flesch in her chapter, focusing on the mass appeal of Australian popular romances, examines how far the Australia’s romance novelist’s “portrayal of the natural or built environment” and Australian society “reflects Australian reality”? She concludes that “the impressions overseas readers will gain from some Australian romance novels at least is reasonably accurate,” as “the society described in modern Australian romances reflects the way Australians like to see themselves—egalitarian, optimistic, resilient, welcoming, etc.”

Crime fiction, according to J. Symonds in *Bloody Murder* (1992), is a genre which accounts for almost one quarter of all new fiction in the English language published around the world each year (6). Like the other genre writer, notes Rachel Franks in her chapter, “Australian crime fiction writers imported many types of crime fiction from Britain, including the gothic mystery and the Newgate novel, and from America, including the locked room mystery and the spy story.” She observes how Australian crime fiction has changed along with the “societies that produce it.” She concludes that for Australian crime fiction to be attractive to mass market and an assured popularity, Australian crime fiction writers must respond “to the changing demands of their readers,” and “continue to develop the genre with increasingly sophisticated stories about murderers and those who bring them to justice.”

In the mass market, publishers often prefer the already established and successful genres, like romance, fantasy, thriller, and western. Another interesting genre, although one that is often “difficult to define,” according to James Doig was overlooked by the popular circulating libraries in Australia. He observes in his chapter that this “marginalization of horror reflects both the trepidation felt by the conservative library system towards “penny dreadfuls,” and the fact that horror had limited popular appeal with the British (and Australian) reading public.” Doig concludes that there is “no Australian author of horror novels with the same commercial cachet” as authors of fantasy or science fiction. He proposes that if Australian horror fiction wants to compete successfully “in the long-term it needs to develop a flourishing and vibrant small press contingent prepared to nurture new talent” like the USA and UK small presses.

According to Russell Blackford “commercial science fiction is the most international of literary forms.” He observes that “Australian SF continues to flourish, even if it trails heroic fantasy in mass-market appeal.” Australian SF writers although published internationally, with a dedicated fan followings in USA, UK and Europe, were overlooked for a very long time by Australian multinational publishers. The international editions had to be imported and were then distributed in Australia

(Congreve and Marquardt 8). Blackford in his chapter throws light on the history of Australian SF and observes how Australian SF writers, with their concern for the future, achieved a powerful synthesis in form and content. The progress of Australian SF, maturity of style in the work of younger writers, and massive worldwide sales make Blackford optimistic as he asserts that “the best Australian writers in the genre will be prominent players on the world stage.”

The Australian version of the Western novel is the subject matter of Toni Johnson-Woods' chapter. Western as a genre was present in Australia since colonial times—a “romance of property” (Dixon 22). She takes up Len Meares, the man behind Marshall Grover as her case study. Perhaps the most intriguing part of her chapter is the study of book covers, as she argues that “books are more than printed codex; they are cultural products with covers, advertising, pricing and distribution.” For Johnson-Woods, “the covers are semiotically charged marketing tools; the artwork, design and titles emit generic and cultural messages.” Australian Western authors, some of the most prolific authors, have been writing not only for an Australian readership but also for an international one. In conclusion Johnson-Woods laments that “I doubt if you'll shake their hands or sign their books at writers' festivals. It is not that they are not likeable people. They are tainted with a fatal literary disease, they're carriers of the popular fiction virus. And even more condemning, they do not even write ‘respectable’ popular fiction like detective fiction—they write politically incorrect masculinist westerns. Regardless of how literary critics assess their contribution to Australian fiction, they provide hours of entertainment for their many readers.”

The “ephemeral comic book” is the subject of discussion in Kevin Patrick's chapter. He notes that Australian comic books were “once the epicentre of a multi-million dollar publishing industry.” However, not only the prominent Australian critics and chroniclers overlook this industry and make no mention of comic books in their works, Patrick notes that references to comic books are also “absent from all major surveys of Australian popular culture published throughout 1987-2001.” Using the framework of an Australian “magazine culture,” Patrick “seeks to reinstate the position of comic books in Australian media history by mapping the cultural economy of Australia's comic book industry and exploring the complex interplay between the competing economic, political and cultural forces that shaped the industry during its years of peak production between 1950-1985.” His chapter, as a starting-point for future researchers, highlights the paucity of primary and secondary source material in this area and recommends an urgent “need for academe to critically engage

with the diffuse body of amateur ‘fan scholarship’ dedicated to Australian comics to garner further insights about this remarkable, yet largely overlooked, publishing industry.”

Richard White examines the “uneasy relationship” between the genre of travel writing and the notions of the popular. He considers the way in which “Australian travel writers negotiated the pitfalls of popularity” and argues that “a number of Australian writers broke with these conventions and willingly embraced the popular.” He takes Frank Clune and Colin Simpson as case studies to examine how their writing courted a popular mass market in Australia and created a genre where “ordinary tourist was hero.”

Apart from other popular genres mentioned above and dealt with in this book, Australia has had a rich tradition of sporting culture but, according to Garrie Hutchinson (1998), it never had the rich tradition of sports-writing unlike the USA or UK, where sports writers are celebrity in their own rights. On the other hand, David Headon in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* (1994) observes that writers such as Banjo Paterson, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Frank Hardy, Bruce Dawe, Peter Carey, Tim Winton, David Williamson and Alex Buzo have all written about sports in Australia in novels, plays, poems, newspapers, and sporting magazines. Bernard Whimpress in his chapter concentrates on “popular histories, biographies and autobiographies produced since the World War II, chiefly relating to cricket.” He notes that sports writing in Australia has rarely reached a wide audience and concludes: “It is regrettable that there are sixteen male writers and no women represented but while a number of women are prominent as daily sports journalists none have gained prominence as sporting authors.”

Undoubtedly, Australian genre fiction writers have successfully exploited the Australian landscape and peoples and as a result their books are today “sold by the millions” across boundaries. They have created stories that are imaginative, visionary, and diverse. They appeal to local and international readerships and, most importantly, are thoroughly entertaining, thus making them a strong presence in the popular fiction bazaar.

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INTRODUCTION

TWO CENTURIES OF POPULAR AUSTRALIAN FICTION¹

TONI JOHNSON-WOODS

Oh! how I hate the very sound of business & when one advises me on one side to write like Guy Boothby [. . .]. (Franklin in a letter to Henry Lawson, n.d.)

Mr Guy Boothby has come to great honours now. His name is large upon hoardings, his books sell like hot cakes, and he keeps a level head through it all. I've met him several times in England, and he added to my already large respect for him. (Kipling qtd. in Lock, *Dr Nickola*: 1906)

Who is Guy Boothby that Miles Franklin should be advised to “write like” him, and Rudyard Kipling admire him? Guy Boothby is one of the many best selling Australian authors who is largely forgotten or ignored by literary scholars. Boothby’s fiction sold in the millions, he received praise and accolades from their peers but who have largely been overlooked in scholarly accounts of the Australian literature. They suffered from the terminal literary disease, popularity. For reasons unknown popularity is positively correlated with “trash” and therefore summarily dismissed. This chapter documents one hundred years of Australian popular fiction in an effort to inspire further research and to incite more scholars to consider the merits of genre authors whose material languishes as their sales grow.

Colonial Period 1860-1899

From the eighteenth century, “Australian” (Australian includes the colonial period, i.e. pre-Federation 1901) readers found their fiction in local and national newspapers. Large metropolitan dailies also printed weekly editions which were often distributed nationally—the *Sydney Mail*

came from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Melbourne *Leader* from the *Age*, the *Australasian* from the *Argus*, the *Queenslander* from the Brisbane *Courier*, and the *Town and Country Journal* from the *Sydney Evening News*—one of the stable features was the serial fiction. Not surprisingly, many of the early serials fiction came from “home” (the United Kingdom); what is generally not known is that a considerable amount of popular fiction came from the United States and most particularly from the penny storypapers such as the *New York Ledger*. By the mid-nineteenth century, Australian periodicals offered material written by colonials for colonials; but at the end of the nineteenth century, the golden age for colonial writers was all but over. The *Sydney Mail* published its last colonial serial in 1884 and the *Australasian* 1891; only one periodical continued to print local authors, the *Australian Journal* (1865-1962).

So what did colonial readers read? Using the popular *Australian Journal* as an exemplar, the following table outlines the genres²

Table 1. Genres³ in the *Australian Journal*

Genre	Total
Adventure	16
Romance	14
Sensational	12
Crime	6
Historical	3
Humorous	1
Political	1

Perhaps not surprisingly, colonial adventures were the most popular—no doubt because they engaged, to some extent, with the trials and tribulations that many readers were facing. The stories follow a simple formula: they trace the English hero’s development through his adventures in Australia where his battles empower him, and he rejects “Home” (the United Kingdom) and learns to love Australia. There are three main subgenres to the colonial adventure story: the goldrush yarn, settler story, and new chum tale—some stories combine the three. The goldrush tales provide detailed accounts of life and customs on the goldfields and often involve a squabble over money which results in murder. The settler story tells of settlers’ battles with the land, fires, floods, marauding bushrangers, and ferocious aborigines. The trope of the lost child was often invoked to underscore the dangers for the novice in the threatening bush. Lastly, the “new chum” tales follow the picaresque adventures of the visiting

Englishman, often a remittance man, sent to the colonies by his family to make his fortune. He is contrasted to the disreputable and often criminal colonial who tries to scam the new chum; the aristocratic Englishman always outwits the currency lad. More often than not, the new chum does not reveal his aristocratic heritage but his innate gentility sets him apart and everyone, particularly the women, like, respect, and love him.

In the earliest romance serials, the English (aristocratic) hero wins the heroine's heart, but he takes her back to the United Kingdom; later heroines, however, opt for the wild colonial boy and remain in Australia. That is, *if* they marry—most often the romance is thwarted, and the heroine is left pining for her love. In the most typical Australian romance, the men forsake the women for further adventures with other men. Cousin to the romance is the sensational story. Regarded as a nineteenth-century fictional idiosyncrasy, sensational fiction wedded the thrills of adventure/mystery/crime to the emotional world of romance. The hyperbolic stories mixed hitherto shunned issues such as incest, bigamy, prostitution, and alcoholism. Australia's contribution to sensational fiction is, at best, overwrought; for example, Mary Fortune's "Clyzia the Dwarf" (1866-1867) is a twisted tale of twins, gypsies and a dwarf love-child. At worst, the colonial stories are bloody, gruesome tales more akin to thrillers as the body count rises. Overall, colonial stories contained higher body counts than their America and British counterparts. So it is no surprise that the first truly best-selling novel was a crime story.

Crime provided Australia with its first international best-seller, author Fergus Hume and his masterpiece *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886). Frustrated by numerous rejections of his play, New Zealand visitor Hume decided to write a book which would attract the attention of Melbourne theatre managers. When a bookseller told him Emile Gaboriau's mysteries were his bestsellers, Hume decided to write a book that had "a mystery, a murder and a description of low life in Melbourne" (Preface *Mystery* 1922). He self-published the first print run when no one else would. The first edition sold out in a few weeks, and a consortium of backers in Britain (the Hansom Cab Publishing Company) bought the rights from Hume for £50. Hume left Melbourne and went to the United Kingdom where he wrote 130 more novels, a few of which have Australian settings, like *Madam Midas* (1888), but none of which achieve the success of *Hansom Cab*. His later fiction was overwrought to say the least: in *The Expedition of Captain Flick* (1896) the protagonist finds an uncharted island populated by ancient Greeks (a reviewer thought it was an "insult to the intelligence" *Times* 18 February 1896: 3); *The Dwarf's Chamber* (1896) has a cursed noble family, a dwarf, a missing heir, and a gloomy

castle; *Lady Jezebel* (1898) combines stolen diamonds, an Eastern potentate, and extraordinary coincidences—it “smelled like a crocodile” (*Times* 2 Sept 1898: 5). Still *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* sold over half-a-million copies worldwide, outstripping Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). It remains on classic whodunit lists such as those compiled by Bourgeau (1986) and Oleksiw (1988) and continues to appear as a clue in crossword puzzles.

Many mystery readers probably do not know that famous thief Raffles began his exploits in Australia—creator E. W. Hornung came to Australia for his health in 1884 and many of his stories have Australian settings,⁴ he even created a fictional Australian bushranger Stingaree (1905). Raffles marked a significant movement in crime fiction; he shifted the focus from the police/detective to the criminal. Furthermore, Raffles is no common thief but an aristocratic one, he has a public school education, plays cricket and is the epitome of the English gentleman. Raffles’ literary counterpart is cad Simon Carne whom critic Jess Nevins (2005) found to be much more interesting and resourceful. Carne is the creation of Adelaide-born author Guy Boothby.

Boothby’s first book was non-fiction. After presenting a successful lecture on his travels across Australia, he published his adventures as *On the Wallaby* (1894); it was reviewed favourably in the *London Times* (24 May 1894: 12). Boothby remained in England and befriended Rudyard Kipling, whom Boothby had met in Adelaide in 1891, and who “liked and respected [Boothby] immensely” (Depasquale 117). In the following decade, Boothby wrote 50 books. He died of influenza in 1905 at 37 years of age. According to contemporary sources, his prodigious output was possible because he dictated his stories into a phonograph and they were then transcribed by secretaries; the *New York Times* claimed his output as “bewildering.” Of particular importance is *A Bid for Fortune* (1895) because it introduced one of the greatest literary villains Dr. Nikola an “aristocratic sublimated Jack the Ripper” (*London Times* 10 Aug 1898: 10). Victorian scholar John Sutherland (1996) claims “if ever a yarn rattled, this one [*A Bid for Fortune*] does” (see ix-xx). The *London Times* described his novels as “frank sensationalism carried to its furthest limits” (28 February 1905: 10) and the *New York Times* dubbed them “blood tingling romances” (16 July 1897: 4). His mix of high-energy narratives filled with bizarre events served with lashings of romance earned him a fortune, and his name became synonymous with successful authorship. Despite the critics’ dubious praise, Boothby seems to have been a favourite among male readers and George Orwell (1939) remembers

[. . .] when I was eleven to when I was about sixteen [. . .]. I got my biggest kick out of reading. At first it was always the boys' penny weeklies—little thin papers with vile print and an illustration in three colours on the cover—and a bit later it was books. Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Nikola [Guy Boothby], The Iron Pirate, Dracula, Raffles. And Nat Gould and Ranger Gull and a chap whose name I forget who wrote boxing stories almost as rapidly as Nat Gould wrote racing ones. (108)

Orwell's penny dreadful diet contained another famous Australian author, the fecund Nat Gould.

Nat Gould, the nineteenth-century precursor to Dick Francis, wrote around 130 racing novels starting with *The Double Event: A Tale of the Melbourne Cup* (1891). British-born Gould spent eleven years in Australia and when he returned to the UK he was contracted to write five novels a year for his publisher—so prolific was he that at his death there were 22 for posthumous publication (*London Times* 26 July 1919: 15). Because roughly half of his novels had significant Australian content, his stories became synonymous with Australia. D. H. Lawrence obviously felt that Gould's writing gave readers a feel for Australia

The fire was very warm. She lay stretched in front of it on the sofa, covered with an eiderdown, and reading a Nat Gould novel, to get the real tang of Australia. (Chapter 14, "Bits", *Kangaroo* 1923)

A. A. Milne, of *Winnie the Pooh* (1915) fame, never read Gould, but most of the men he knew did. It is worth quoting Milne (1920) at some length because he elucidates on Gould's style, and the breadth of his popularity

There died recently a gentleman named Nat Gould, twenty million copies of whose books had been sold. They were hardly ever reviewed in the literary papers; advertisements of them rarely appeared; no puffs nor photographs of the author were thrust upon one. Unostentatiously he wrote them—five in a year [. . .] it is perhaps too late now to begin to read them, but we cannot help wondering whence came his enormous popularity.

Mr. Gould, *as all the world knows*, wrote racing novels [. . .]. Every third man in the Army carried one about with him [. . .]. It is a terrifying thought that he wrote a hundred and thirty of them. A hundred and thirty times he described that hoarse cry from twenty thousand throats, "They're off!" A hundred and thirty times he described the downs black with humanity, and the grandstand, and the race itself, and what the bookmakers were saying, and the scene in the paddock. How did he do it? Had he a special rubber stamp for all these usual features, which saved him the trouble of writing them every time? Or did he come quite fresh to it with

each book? He wrote five of them every year; did he forget in March what he said in January, only to forget in June and visualize the scene afresh? To describe a race-course a hundred thirty times—what a man! (64)

Though formulaic, Gould was praised for his eloquent descriptions of horses, his sincerity, morality (*London Times* 26 July 1919: 15), and “beautiful simplicity of character and motive” (“Historical Romance” *New York Times* 6 October 1918: 67). His sales were estimated at over 100 million copies (*New York Times* 3 June 1923: SM 4). For many years Gould’s and Boothby’s output bracketed them with other “light” and hugely successful writers Zane Grey and Edgar Wallace.

Hume, Boothby, and Gould furthered their publishing careers in the United Kingdom because Australia did not have an aggressive publishing industry. Local booksellers Angus & Robertson commenced publishing in the 1890s, and the *Bulletin* printed a few cheap paperbacks, but still Australia’s publishing industry was very much in its infancy. Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* (1901), though enthusiastically received by Henry Lawson and A. G. Stephens, could only find favour with an overseas publisher. But the local scene was to improve with the advent of a new bookseller.

Nationalism 1920s-1930s

Henry Lloyd might have established the New South Wales Bookstall Company from a chain of railway bookstalls in 1879, but it was Alfred Cecil Rowlandson who turned the company into a successful publishing concern. In the 1890s, the NSW Bookstall published a handful of reprints (Mills 7), but after Rowlandson took the helm, the publishing list changed. He scoured popular periodicals for potential authors and encouraged local writers to supply him with Australian material (Mills 21, 39). The company’s first original title was Steele Rudd’s [Arthur Hoey Davis] *Sandy’s Selection* (1904) a collection of Rudd’s humorous *Bulletin* short stories. *Sandy’s Selection* sold circa 100,000 copies and ran to nearly twenty editions. Rudd would contribute over twenty titles to the Bookstall in the forthcoming years. Carol Mills (1991) describes the Bookstall titles as “lively stories of bushrangers, horse races, gold, floods, bushfires, droughts and other Australian phenomena” (10), in other words, same literary fare the *Australian Journal* offered half a century earlier. One of the Bookstall’s best-selling authors is little known Arthur Wright. In 1909, the Bookstall published *A Rogue’s Luck*, the first of Wright’s seventeen racing novels. Wright’s racing stories earned him a reputation and sales that rivalled Nat Gould.

Rowlandson continued to nurture local writers and published Norman Lindsay's first book *A Curate in Bohemia* (1913) (see Mills 33). As Patricia Holt points out, Norman Lindsay became more famous in overseas for his writing than his art work (2003: 62); *The Cautious Amorist* (1932) was best-seller for over thirty years in New York and London (Holt 74). By 1922 the Bookstall's halcyon days were all but over; it had published some 120 authors, printed nearly 200 titles, and sold approximately 4.5 million copies to a population of five million (Mills 18).

Adelaide-born A. G. [Smiler] Hales (1860-1936) was a boxer of some renown, a war correspondent, and an adventurer (Kirwan 113). Certainly Hales' exploits in the Boer War and feats of derring-do attracted considerable press attention during his lifetime. He was also a writer. After the Boer War, Hales settled in London and created McGlusky, an Australian of Scot descent who roamed the world "with a Bible in one hand and a brick in the other" (*London Times* 30 Dec 1936: 12). McGlusky starred in about twenty eponymous novels such as *President McGlusky* (1918), *McGlusky, the Mormon* (1929), *McGlusky, the Seal Poacher* (1935), and *McGlusky, the Empire Builder* (1937). McGlusky books often reached thirteen impressions and sales of two million. Hales' McGlusky was one of the last adventurers of the British Empire.

For many overseas readers, however, the best known of all Australian authors is crime writer Arthur Upfield. The Mystery Writers' Guild of America thought highly enough of Upfield to admit him as a full member (in 1958), the first non-American to be so honoured. J. B. Priestley claimed: "If you like detective stories that are something more than puzzles, that have solid characters and backgrounds, that avoid familiar patterns of crime and detection, then Mr. Upfield is your man" (qtd. in <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/aupfiel.htm>), and variations of this sentiment appeared on many dust jackets. Because of his popularity he was neglected by Australian literati and he responded with some scathing observations in *An Author Bites the Dust* (1948)

We were discussing the novel and novelists and you bring forward the atrocious efforts of a "whodunit" writer [. . .].

[character responds] "They sell [. . .] and I've seen high praise of them in overseas journals."

[antagonist responds] "We are interested [. . .] in Literature with a capital L, not commercial fiction that received approval of the common herd." (14)

Upfield retaliates by killing the critic.

Though born in the United Kingdom, Upfield spent most of his life in Australia; his work, especially on the first rabbit-proof fence, provided the fodder for his mystery series. In 1928 Upfield's first novel *The House of Cain* appeared, but it was not until the following year that he introduced Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte of the Queensland Police in *The Barakee Mystery* (1929). According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (1990) "Bony" is a

part-Aborigine who had graduated from the University of Queensland. Upfield claimed that "Bony" was based upon the part-Aborigine Leon Wood, a wise man, a skilled tracker and a good friend. (Knight 305-306)

The *London Times* labelled Bony a "unique and memorable" detective (14 February 1964: 12). Thirty novels followed in as many years and usually achieved sales of around 350,000 copies per title; the titles celebrate Australian names and history *The Widows of Broome* (1951), *The Bachelors of Broken Hill* (1958), *Bony and the Kelly Gang* (1960), *Death of a Swagman* (1987). The books were translated into numerous languages (Japanese, German, Spanish) and adopted for radio and television. Upfield's appropriation of aboriginal culture and aboriginal identity remains controversial. With the exception of Katharine S. Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1928), indigenous Australians are largely absent from popular fiction until Upfield.

Not all best-sellers were crime fiction though. Alice Grant Rosman gave up journalism to write popular romances. The majority of her twenty novels are set in the UK but at least four have Australian connections. Miles Franklin praised Rosman:

Out of a sparse population, Australia undoubtedly contributes a considerable company to equal and surpass the Homelander[s] [British] or Americans in their own fields, and so gain the various grades of esteem and success, and in some cases without fully discarding the Australian locale [. . .] Alice Grant Rosman [. . .] spring[s] to mind. ("The Future of Australian Literature": 1938: 263-265)

On the other hand, venerable publisher P. R. Stephensen thought Rosman was a "shirker" who'd abandoned Australia. If she, and others like her had stayed,

they would with ease have created a body of Australian literature which, added to that we already possess, would by now have been enough to make Australia's name and quality resound as one of the most highly cultivated and civilised nations upon the earth. (244)

The *London Times* was rather dismissive of Rosman's "sentimental" fiction (29 June 1931); however, the *New York Times* enthusiastically reviewed her books. Margaret Wallace thought *The Young and Secret* (1930) was "gay and delightful [. . .] with an extraordinary and amusing gallery of characters [. . .] intensely readable and deeply stimulating" (29 June 1930: 62); and *The Sleeping Child* (1935) was charming and entertaining "[the] writing presents a remarkable deftness and facility, and a complex of those undefinable qualities" (23 June 1935: BR7). Eight of her novels appeared in the *New York Times*' "bestseller" lists.

Around the same time as Rosman achieved overseas success, Sydney-sider F(rederick) J(oesph) Thwaites (1908-1979) achieved local recognition. Thwaites started publishing romances like *The Broken Melody* with the NSW Bookstall (1932); his thirty-two novels and two travel books were "immensely popular" and sold more than four million copies (Blaber 1990): some titles were reprinted 40 or more times and claimed sales of more than 100,000 and in 1947, one publisher maintained that the ten-year-old *Rock End* was in its 17th printing and that 130,000 copies of it had been sold. *The Broken Melody* has been revised for film (1937) and radio (1961). An inveterate traveller, his success was confined to Australia (Blaber 1990); his books reflected his travels and often infused an adventure story with a strong love interest. Thwaites was typical of the mid-century entrepreneur writers—he penned 2500 words a day, published approximately 3 novels per year with a variety of companies (New Century Press, Jackson and O'Sullivan, and NSW Bookstall), and started two presses (F. J. Thwaites Publishing Coy and Harcourt Press).

During this period, Dale Collins (1897-1956) also realised substantial sales for his fiction—such as *Winds of Chance* (1947) and *Simple Simon Smith* (1949). As did Ion (Jack) Idriess (1889-1979) who sold more than three million copies of quasi-fictional stories—such as *The Cattle King* (1936), *Flynn of the Inland* (1932), and *Lasseter's Last Ride* (1931). Frank Clune—*Martin Cash: The Last of the Tasmanian Bushrangers* (1955) and *The Viking of Van Diemen's Land: The Stormy Life of Jorgen Jorgensen* (1954); and E. V. Timms—*Conflict* (193-) and *The Big Country* (1962) wrote similar faction tales.

Strangely enough, World War II helped the Australian publishing industry. As all non-essential imports incurred heavy import duties, cheap American magazines became too expensive to be worthwhile importing,

legally anyway (Johnson-Woods, “Pulp Friction”). And, many still arrived as “ballast” on ships and American servicemen stationed in Brisbane also had a ready supply of comics and magazines. As to if these publications were on sold is, to the best of my research, unrecorded. Local printing companies such as Action Comics, Cleveland Publishing, Currawong, Horwitz and Invincible scrambled to fill the fiction void. First they needed material to satisfy readers who’d become used to cheap fiction, then they needed to create publishing infrastructures to support editing, designing, printing and distributing thousands of copies of dozens of new titles each month. Never before had the local publishing industry been so fecund; this period could rightly be considered the golden age of Australian popular fiction (Johnson-Woods, *Pulp* 2004).

Fertile Fifties

Make no mistake, the paperback fiction of the 1940s and 1950s was not a high quality product. The soft-covered, stapled/saddle-stitched cultural artefacts were not meant survive longer than the train journey or entertainment they afforded. They were priced at a few pennies and sold at railway stations rather than bookshops. These “books” (more accurately labelled “digests,” but most commonly called “pulp” because of the coarse wood-pulp paper on which they were printed) are a hybrid format: part comic, paperback, magazine. They do not resemble the paperback originals (pbos) published by Ace, Gold Medal or Dell in America. But, like their American counterparts, they sold in the millions.

Of the many hundreds of writers of this period, one in particular went on to achieve international success. Carter Brown was the house name for Alan G. Yates. Yates, an Englishman, settled in Australia after World War II. While working as a publicist for QANTAS he wrote genre fiction in his spare time. After a few years, publisher Horwitz developed the persona “Peter Carter Brown” and asked Yates if he would be interested in writing the series. Yates agreed to write two novelettes and one novel a month in exchange for an advance against royalties. Sales climbed—in 1955 the books’ covers claimed sales of over ten million copies, Australia’s population was roughly twelve million—prompting Stanley Horwitz to approach US publishing giant Signet. Signet was impressed with the books Horwitz had submitted, and they signed a licensing agreement with Horwitz for ten new Carter Browns each year (Johnson-Woods, “Mysterious Case” 2004). For the next three decades, Yates struggled to maintain this writing schedule and penned more than 200 titles of the *Carter Brown Mystery Series* (1951-84). The series was licensed to many overseas

countries including United Kingdom, Japan, France and German; and other cultural products included the radio series, the *Carter Brown Mystery Theatre* and comic books. At the time of Yates' death, the covers claimed 80 million copies in print. Carter Brown's popularity can, in some way, be explained by his irreverent approach to the hardboiled style. He offered a humorous, tongue-in-cheek antidote to a violent and often sadistic genre which usually appeared in America. His local rival, Larry Kent, offered a more traditional approach.

Another Sydney publisher, Cleveland, responded to Carter Brown's success with a detective series of their own. Larry Kent (1954-1983) was the star of a popular radio serial when Cleveland bought the publishing rights. In order to compete with Carter Brown, a new title had to appear each month and so Cleveland used at least two authors, Des R. Dunn and Don Haring, to write the 400 plus titles; which author wrote which title is still unknown. The series continues to be re-printed in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps our most prolific genre is the western. "Author" Marshall Grover has penned nearly one thousand titles. Len Meares wrote over 800 books as has another author Paul Wheelahan. After a dozen years in Australia, Marshall Grover crossed the Pacific when Bantam Books bought the rights: "Marshall Grover" became "Marshall McCoy," "Larry and Stretch" became "Larry and Streak", and "Big Jim Rand" became "Nevada Jim Gage." Wheelahan and Keith Hetherington currently publish with British Black Horse Westerns, and their titles can be found in most Australian public libraries. Perhaps strangest is the Scandinavian penchant for Australian westerns—Denmark, Norway and Sweden have local series which consist mainly of Australian stories. Cleveland in Sydney still publishes westerns today.

Another ignored but tremendously popular author is J. E. Macdonnell. Macdonnell who wrote over 200 war/naval stories that sold around 40,000 paperback and 870,000 hardbacks copies *per* title. They were translated into numerous languages and sold in many countries. Little is known about other pulp fiction authors such as Richard Wilkes-Hunter, Keith Hetherington, Tony Veitch, and Gordon Clive Bleack. These authors did not specialise in any one genre, they wrote whatever was asked of them. Hetherington wrote approximately 100 detective stories, 300 westerns, and some adventure stories; Bleack wrote science fiction, westerns, romances, crime, and sporting stories for most of the Sydney publishers in the 1940s and 1950s (Johnson-Woods, "Bleack House" 2002). These authors were journeymen, writing to pay mortgages or a few of life's luxuries, they wrote to genre needs and publishing lengths. The conditions and pay were

ordinary, £1 per 1000 words, but Bleeck seemed content to supplement his full-time salary. Eventually the writing bubble burst. In 1959 the import bans were lifted and imported material flooded the local market again. Almost overnight the “pulp” publishers closed down—only Horwitz and Cleveland survived.

One of the most intriguing book stories of the late 1950s is that of *They're a Weird Mob* (1957). The humorous story by “Nino Culotta” (John O’Grady) attracted huge sales and turned Sydney publishing house Ure Smith into a going publishing concern (Carter 2004). When *They're a Weird Mob* was sold overseas, the “Readers Report” in the *New York Times* quoted the publisher’s boast that the book was “the most successful book ever published” (4 February 1962: 214)—surely referring to its Australian sales.

Over the decades certain genres proved to be more popular: publishers most often requested science fiction in the late 1940s, crime fiction in the 1950s, and romance in the 1960s and 1970s—mainly due to the uptake of local authors by romance publishers Mills and Boon. In the 1940s, the romances were more likely to be of local interest ie *Canberra Girl*. In the 1960s Invincible promised two new love stories a month and Cleveland romances disguised their Australian heritage under series such as “French Romance” and “American Romance”. But it was doctor/nurse stories of the 1960s that proved to be the most sought after: Shane Douglas (47), Shauna Marlowe (26), Kerry Mitchell (19), Sheila Garland (12), Karen Miller (10), and Leslie Wilkes (18)—all of whom were really Richard Wilkes-Hunter—were published by Horwitz and Calvert. They were onsold to various Scandinavian countries between 1960 and 1983: in Finland for example, three monthly series reprinted Australian stories: at least half of *Amor-Kirjat*’s (1963-1978) 70 titles are Australian; of *Valkea Sarja*’s (1964-1969) 35 titles, 12 are Australia; and *Lääkäriromaani* (1973- ?) printed a handful of Shane Douglas romances. These romances made the most of local locations: they were often set on Barrier Reef islands and in Papua New Guinea, and included flying doctors and outback nurses. In the 1970s category romances (Mills and Boon or Harlequin) re-introduced fiction factory conditions and thus authors such as Margaret Way (over 100), Emma D’Arcy (more than 90) and Valerie Parv (over 50) have found steady work and a faithful readership in both Australia and overseas.

In 1977 the best-selling of all Australian novels, a romance, *The Thorn Birds* appeared. As is typical, the woman does not get her man, and thus it echoes the futility of Australian romances since colonial times—a Catholic priest is as unattainable as any currency lad. *The Thorn Birds* not-so-

happily-ever-after captured international imagination—more than 10.5 million copies were sold in six years and it has appeared in more than 35 versions. It has spawned a mini-industry which includes a television mini-series (the second most watched tv series in the United States), and a musical (2009).

Conclusion

Since the 1970s a few Australian authors have achieved world-wide recognition, but the majority of authors rely on local success. Australia's "best-selling" author Bryce Courtenay's *The Power of One* (1989) sold seven and a half million copies (www.brycecourtenay.com). He has written another nineteen books and was honoured as a Literary Legend on Australian stamps. Di Morrissey is the author of seventeen blockbusters and claims to be Australia's most "popular female novelist" (*Herald Sun* 30 October 2010: 20). Matthew Reilly has sold nearly four million action/thrillers. Crime fiction author Peter Corris rewrites hardboiled fiction and sets his 40 Cliff Hardy stories in Sydney. In Melbourne Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher has starred in eighteen 1920s' mysteries while her contemporary counterpart Corinna Chapman has baked and solved five contemporary crime stories. Award-winning Peter Temple has fewer novels, but his Jack Irish series has achieved great critical acclaim. Perhaps the most prolific is Jon Cleary who has written over fifty novels of various genres; he is probably best remembered for *You Can't See Round Corners* (1947) and *The Sundowners* (1952). Speculative fiction authors Sara Douglass, Garth Nix, and Kim Wilkins have achieved greater sales overseas than in Australia. Newcomer Kate Moreton has written only three books but has sold over three million copies; *Shifting Fog (The House at Riverton)* and *The Forgotten Garden* appeared in the bestseller lists in Australia, the UK and the USA. Unfortunately sales figures for category romance novelists such as Margaret Way and Valerie Parv are not available so the number of titles remains the best marker of their success.

The astute reader might have noticed that most of the references for this chapter come from newspapers and periodicals; there is a simple reason—despite the huge circulations of these writers, they have attracted little academic or serious literary consideration. Indeed few libraries in Australia have complete runs of our most popular authors—science fiction and crime are the best preserved; romance and westerns are virtually ignored. Many of the traditional sources of literature, such as biographies and dictionary entries, often include critics' dismissive comments. For

instance Dale Collins is “rightly criticized by H. M. Green for wasting the promise of his talent in ‘mere thrillerism’ ” (74-75), states Stuart Sayers in Collins’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (1981) entry. However, the *New York Times* claimed Collins was a writer of “exceptional gifts” (“Now East, Now West,” 18 September 1927: BR8). The disjunction between academic perception and reader acceptance continues to keep entertaining reading off literature syllabi. However, more recently academics have embraced less canonical texts and it is to these articles and books that the serious student of Australian popular fiction should turn: Stephen Knight investigates popular Australian crime fiction in *Continent of Mystery* (1997). Science fictioners Russell Blackford, Van Ikin, and Sean McMullen bravely go, in *Strange Constellations* (1999), where few academics have gone when they explore science fiction in Australia (see Blackford’s chapter). Juliet Flesch treads even ‘murkier’ waters in her exploration of romance fiction *From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels* (2004). Sports fiction and westerns remain uncharted areas.

Genre fiction and popular fiction are not synonymous; neither does popular necessarily mean ‘trash’ fiction. Popular fiction can be literary fiction—and not all best-selling fiction is genre fiction. Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (1988) might have sold millions of copies, but high sales do not necessarily mean the book was widely read (let alone understood). Sales figures can be misleading; when Carter Brown’s publishers claim 80 million “in print” what does that signify? As Laura Miller demonstrates, best-selling lists are more often marketing tools than reliable data (2000).

One of the hallmarks of literary fiction is its universality; popular fiction makes no such claims. Indeed, ephemerality is its strength. Most of the fiction mentioned above was penned for money, whether to supplement an income (as in the case of Bleeck), to provide an income (Alan Yates) or, in the case of *They’re a Weird Mob*, to satisfy a bet (Carter 56). As such, the novels contain little in the way of philosophical musings, they were not the written expression of a writer’s urge to share their thoughts and philosophies with the world, by and large they were written to satisfy an editor’s needs which, in turn, were to cater to the demands of their readers. Because pulp fiction was written and published within days, it offers an immediate and intimate glimpse into another culture. For example, the language replicates that of its time and contains idiomatic words and phrases which are largely lost to posterity; the office romances of the 1950s explore the issues of post-war women who wanted careers but who still lived at home, who sought parental permission before