

Carole Ferrier, ed.
*GENDER, POLITICS AND FICTION: TWENTIETH
CENTURY AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S NOVELS*
St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985
Diana Brydon,

This is an important and valuable book, but like most anthologies, uneven. The collection has been designed to bring together "a range of new readings of twentieth century Australian women's fiction from socialist and/or feminist standpoints," readings designed to question the "literary establishment's construction of the institution of literary criticism, its notions of 'literary value', and its concepts of 'literature.'" The editor's introduction provides an overview of the overlapping historical, political, and theoretical contexts in which the study locates itself: the development of feminist criticism, the history of women's writing and its reception in Australia, and the necessity for addressing class and economic questions.

Eleven essays follow, most of them original contributions in line with one or several of the anthology's stated objectives. Susan Gardner's excellent essay on *My Brilliant Career* places it in the context of colonial women's writing. Valerie Kent focuses on Miles Franklin herself. Both these essays resist hagiography to focus intelligently on Franklin's inability to connect racial and gender oppression. Deborah Jordan's essay on Nettie Palmer as critic reclaims an undervalued writer and genre for analysis. While the essays on Franklin and Palmer consider the ways in which their Australian nationalism interfered with their feminism, the essays by Pat Buckridge on Katharine Susannah Prichard and by Carole Ferrier on Jean Devaney consider the interplay between political and literary commitments.

Joy Thwaite's essay on Eve Langley is more traditional in focus and scope, linking the life and work of a neglected minor writer. Susan Sheridan's reading of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* as a critique of the patriarchal family drama demolishes Randall Jarrell's well-known introduction to the novel to set up its own convincing reading, albeit one that dismisses the anthology's declared interest in questions of class. In arguing for Elizabeth Harrower's participation in a female subculture, Frances McInhery goes further in underplaying time and place to focus on "the almost universal subordination of women."

Perhaps appropriately for its subject matter, Sneja Gunew's essay on migrant women writers is more theoretically exploratory and attuned to the questioning of discursive formations. In looking at the critical reception of Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*, Bronwen Levy uses reception aesthetics to question the literary establishment's construction of value. These essays are exceptionally fine, illuminating the collection's stated objectives and suggesting directions for future thinking. Indeed only the final essay falls disappointingly short in this otherwise stimulating anthology. The subject matter itself is largely at fault: any survey of Australian women novelists of the 1970s would have difficulty remaining true to the anthology's questioning spirit. This article, however, seems not only devoid of any theoretical self-consciousness but actually at odds with the direction of the rest of the book, eclectic as it is. Plot summary at the level of "*Tirra Lirra by the River* has much typical women's experience" provides a disappointing conclusion to a lively and generally challenging collection. Despite this final lapse, however, *Gender, Politics and Fiction* remains essential reading.

Karen B. Mann
*THE LANGUAGE THAT MAKES GEORGE ELIOT'S
FICTION*
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
Pp. 226. \$22.95

Alexander Welsh
GEORGE ELIOT AND BLACKMAIL
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985. Pp. 388.
\$24.00
Reviewed by Daniel P. Deneau

The vast amount written in the last thirty years about the life and works of George Eliot must leave her readers with some very sober reflections on the purpose and the future of scholarship. For whom are the rapidly multiplying studies being prepared? Is it possible even for dedicated specialists to digest the ever-increasing information and insights? And is the