

## Special Issue: The Popular Culture of Romantic Love in Australia (Editor's Introduction)

Hsu-Ming Teo

Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

A couple of years ago I put out a call for papers for a project on the popular culture of romantic love in Australia. The aim of the project was to understand how Australians' beliefs, ideals, and practices of romantic love have changed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; how Australians have portrayed being in love, or falling out of love, and how these issues are related to dating, courtship, and long-term commitments such as cohabitation and marriage. In other words: what kinds of popular cultural practices have facilitated or reflected ideas of romantic love to Australians? What is the place of romantic love in the nation, and what is romantic love expected to do within Australian society and culture?

Australia has not been known for its particularly notable or enthusiastic celebrants of love. Quite the contrary. One of our most famous and grumpy expatriates, Germaine Greer, excoriated love in the following terms:

Love, love, love – all the wretched cant of it, masking egotism, lust, masochism, fantasy under a mythology of sentimental postures, a welter of self-induced miseries and joys, blinding and masking the essential personalities in the frozen gestures of courtship, in the kissing and the dating and the desire, the compliments and the quarrels which vivify its barrenness.  
(*The Female Eunuch*, 1970)

Given her scorn for love, Greer might have been pleased to know that her fellow Australian scholars feared that Australians were in fact lacking a well-developed culture of romantic love. In 1982 a literary conference held at the University of Sydney on "Love in Australian Writing" came to the conclusion that, on the whole, Australian literature "is not rich in the prose or poetry of love in its self-transcendent sense" (Clark et al., 45). One scholar suggested: it is "not that Australians are incapable of love, that they do not feel it, but that its flow is soon diverted into channels of pessimism and despair" (Clark et al., 3). Participants went on to question: "Why is love not convincingly revealed in our literature?"

Is it that we have no language for the feelings? Or are the feelings themselves absent?" (Clark et al., 31).

Any reader or scholar of popular romance fiction would immediately realize that the reason why Australian literature seemed so bereft of love to these academics was because they had failed to consider romance novels. Since then, of course, Juliet Flesch's *From Australia With Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels* (2004) has appeared and increasing numbers of Australian scholars and postgraduate students are studying popular romance novels, whether Australian or not.

For the purposes of this special issue of *JPRS*, however, I wanted to see what my colleagues made of romantic love in Australian popular culture as a whole, not just in romance novels, and whether they thought Australians were indeed optimistic or pessimistic about the possibilities of love. The papers in this issue reflect the attempt to reflect on how love is represented in material culture, and in songs, poems, novels, printed images and films. The articles are arranged in roughly chronological order (by topic, not by composition) to give the reader some sense of how ideas about romantic love, and the treatment of love, have changed over time.

The issue opens with Annita Boyd's history of the "Nellie Stewart bangle", a solid gold bangle given as a symbol of love and commitment to Nellie Stewart, one of Australia's first stage celebrities, by her married lover, George Musgrove, in 1885. Boyd's consideration of the material culture of love shows how Stewart's celebrity status ignited a passion for this item of jewelry among young women, but its meaning changed over time from being a special item given by a lover as a romantic engagement or wedding gift, to a commonplace gift from family members by the early twentieth century.

Covering the same late nineteenth/early twentieth century period as Boyd's essay, Hsu-Ming Teo's article explores Australian romance fiction from 1880s to 1930s to consider how Australian women writers conceptualized romantic love, gender relations, marriage, and the role of the romantic couple within the nation and British Empire. She argues that prior to Australian Federation (1901), short stories about love and romance novels tended to be more pessimistic about the outcome of romantic love in the colonies. After Federation, however, many of the obstacles to love that had developed in the colonial romance persisted, but in the post-Federation romance novel women writers began to imagine that Australian character, culture and environment were sufficient to overcome such obstacles and end happily. In the post-1901 romances, a successful marriage between an Australian and a Briton also served the higher purpose of either nation- or empire-building.

Where Teo focuses on the more traditional study of women producing romantic narratives, Melissa Bellanta's article focuses on masculine expressions of sentimentality and romance by exploring the multi-media phenomenon of *The Sentimental Bloke*: a book of poems by C.J. Dennis that was popularized through radio and concert hall recitals, films and further related works of verse by Dennis. Bellanta argues that a consideration of this love story, which expresses heterosexual romantic feelings from a self-consciously masculine point of view, shows that Australian men took an active interest in producing and consuming romantic culture during the mid-twentieth century – a topic which has hitherto been neglected.

The theme of male-centered meditations about heterosexual romantic love continues with Mark Nicholls's study of the popular Australian film of 1997 starring

Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett, *Thank God He Met Lizzie*. Where Bellanta focuses on sentimental feelings of love among men, an analysis of this romantic comedy/drama leads Nicholls to think about male melancholia, loss of intimacy, and stasis in marital relationships. The 1990s opened with an exuberant celebration of Australian multicultural love in Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) but, increasingly, this was a decade when Australian culture seemed to exhibit a loss of confidence in narratives of romantic love, dominated as it was by two other internationally popular Australian films where friendship was more enduring than romantic love: *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). Perhaps *Thank God He Met Lizzie* fits into this cultural melancholia about love. In exploring postmodern Bluebeard Tales – both film and fiction – from Australia and New Zealand, Lucy Butler shows how the very narrative forms of romantic love and intimacy are destabilized, marked by violence and repetition. These tales structurally undermine the quest for love and truth, sometimes substituting self-realization as a more appropriate goal instead.

This issue concludes on a more optimistic note with two pieces about love in the twenty-first century. Lauren O'Mahony introduces us to 'chook lit' – the Australian rural romance. Through an astute consideration of *Jillaroo* (2002) by Rachel Treasure, Australia's most popular rural romance novelist, O'Mahony compares how men and women relate to and treat each other with how they relate to and treat animals, particularly dogs. She thus demonstrates the concerns of the subgenre with contemporary gender, environmental and animal rights issues in rural Australia. The last piece in this issue is a transcript of Lisa Fletcher's interview with Anne Gracie, one of Australia's most awarded popular historical romance writers and a past president of the Romance Writers of Australia (2006 – 2008). Their conversation ranges over such topics as Gracie's thoughts on the distinctions and connections between popular romance and literary fiction, Gracie's latest novel *The Autumn Bride* (2013), and the happy ending in romance fiction.

### **Works Cited**

- Clark, Axel, Fletcher, John and Marsden, Robin. 1982. *The Theme of Love in Australian Writing: Colloquium Papers*. Sydney: Christopher Brennan Society and the Literature Board of the Australia Council.
- Greer, Germaine. 1970. *The Female Eunuch*. London: McGibbon & Kee. Print.