

'APART FROM THE EXPECTED'
THE NOVELS OF BRIAN CASTRO

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The Novels of Brian Castro

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And suddenly when you see those angles you are somehow liberated ... from the one point of view. It's the notion that fiction can do anything, *apart from the expected.*

Brian Castro,
interview with Michael Deves, 29 November 1997

To be surprised. I used to argue with Rory about that. I used to think, and still do, that to be surprised is the object of all life, the point of living.

Pomeroy, page 5

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Summary

Brian Castro has been critically acclaimed as a novelist since his first novel won the 1983 *Australian/Vogel* Award.¹ Four of his six novels have won major literary prizes. Yet Brian Castro remains relatively unknown as a novelist, and despite plentiful reviews of his work on publication, there have been few attempts to critically analyse his work in academic and literary publications.

This thesis is the first extensive study of Brian Castro's work as an oeuvre. It seeks to draw out the impetus behind Castro's writing, to elucidate the subjects that he is concerned with and the techniques he employs, and to place him as a writer within the contemporary Australian novel tradition.

The thesis is built around close reading of Castro's six novels, reading of secondary sources where these directly influence the novels or Castro's methods, research into Castro's literary papers held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, and correspondence and an interview with Brian Castro.

I have also endeavoured to explain the discrepancy between Castro's high literary reputation and relatively modest commercial success. Castro's limited readership can be explained by the difficulty of his novels, which are dense, allusive, non-linear and ultimately elusive. They are written in a very 'literary' style, with few concessions to the reader, especially readers who are not familiar with Modernist and Postmodernist approaches. The novels require the reader to invest considerable effort in digesting the narrative, and yet may well leave the reader unsettled and perplexed. The subject matter, too, is challenging, centring on the existential concerns of the novels' principal characters. Castro stands apart in a country that has not had a strong tradition of Modernist and Postmodernist writing, particularly in the novel genre, and he brings a wider perspective to Australian writing, incorporating European and Asian influences in his hybrid vision.

The thesis first examines concerns common to all of Castro's novels, and then deals with each of the six novels individually, analysing them in detail and summarising the critical reaction at the time of publication. The closing chapter draws together the novels as an oeuvre, and discusses Castro's place in contemporary Australian writing.

This thesis seeks to:

- analyse Brian Castro's six published novels
- examine the ways in which his life informs his art
- define the accomplishment of his writing
- elucidate the common concerns that inform his novels
- document primary source material
- locate Brian Castro within the Australian literary tradition.

¹ The Award is officially described as the 1983 Vogel, but because it applies to a manuscript submitted in 1982 Castro's award is often called the '1982 Vogel'.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Michael Ian Deves *November 1999*

Declaration

I believe that this thesis is properly presented, conforms to the specifications for the thesis and is of sufficient standard to be, *prima facie*, worthy of examination.

Dr Lyn Jacobs Supervisor *November 1999*

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In writing this thesis I have benefited from the co-operation of many people. In particular I gratefully acknowledge:

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Explanatory notes

Throughout this thesis Brian Castro's novels are referred to simply by their title: *Birds of Passage*, *Pomeroy*, *Double-Wolf*, *After China*, *Drift*, *Stepper*, plus page number, which refers to the edition described in the Bibliography. There are no variant editions.

Brian Castro's major essays are referred to by a short title, as follows:

'Necessary Idiocy'

'Necessary Idiocy and the Idea of Freedom' *Age Monthly Review*, 1989, Vol. 8, No. 10, February p. 5-7

'The Private and the Public'

'The Private and the Public: A Meditation on Noise', *Island*, No. 47, Winter 1991, pp. 14-19

'Heterotopias'

'Heterotopias: Writing and Location' *Australian Literary Studies*, 1995, Vol. 17, No. 2, October p. 178-182

'Writing Asia'

Writing Asia and Auto/biography, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995, 38 pp.

'Autobiography'

Writing Asia and Auto/biography, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1995, 38 pp.

'Lesions'

'Lesions' *Meanjin*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 1995, p. 59-68

References for Brian Castro's essays are to their original publication: many of these have recently been collected and published as *Looking for Estrellita* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999).

I have capitalised Modernism and Postmodernism in my writing in order to standardise, but I have left quoted material as originally printed.

for

Yvonne

Preface

This thesis is one grounded in paradox. Its subject, the major fiction of contemporary Australian novelist Brian Castro, is strikingly powerful and original, but at the same time elusive. The English critic and biographer Ian Hamilton was obliged to rename his proposed biography of Salinger *In Search of J.D. Salinger*. In a similar way Brian Castro, the writer, has eluded being pinned down. While Brian Castro the man is most courteous and generous with his time, and ready to talk at length about his own work and writing as a vocation, as an author he is fugitive, and his works are similarly slippery. This is partly because his writing is *designed* to inhibit resolution.

This thesis is an exploratory analysis of the work of an experimental writer. It investigates Castro's techniques and preoccupations and argues that there is much to be said for writing that withholds resolution in favour of open-ended exploration.

I have taken heart from John Harwood's assessment of critics' attempts to come to terms with T.S. Eliot's work. Having abandoned hope of finding 'the One True Meaning' Harwood comes to the conclusion: 'The criticism I found illuminating was always tentative, exploratory, and incomplete, proceeding by way of hints and guesses rather than systematic explication.'² In dealing with Castro I am, similarly, advancing tentatively and 'proceeding by way of hints and guesses'. This approach is, however, quite in sympathy with its subject; Brian Castro consistently points out that his novels are not intended to neatly tie things together. In his essay 'Just Flirting' he characterises novels thus: 'A novel ... is not a neatly worked out story. It is a falling down and a tripping from one contingency to the next.' Further on in the same passage he says:

² John Harwood, *Eliot to Derrida: The Poverty of Interpretation*, Macmillan, London, 1995, p. 3

It is unfortunate that writers get themselves positioned. They will never be able to free themselves of what will become a diabolical millstone: the *either/or*. And this is because [every writer] wants to be so rational and not ambiguous. They all want to be loved. Above all, to make sense *now* ... rather than letting some shape emerge. Flirtation then, is for unsettling positions, for re-invention. It is not for commitment or possession. It is providing a constant desire by frustrating 'knowability' ...³

It is a characteristic of Brian Castro's work that while he continually creates a desire for the reader to move forward and to investigate, he also continually unsettles the reader, refuses possession and frustrates 'knowability'. There is a constant deferral: in practice, things are not attainable although they are not ruled out as impossible. What *is* impossible, for Castro, is the neat solution: the simple, binary choice that provides an unambiguous 'answer'.

This writing is, therefore, elusive, but it is also rich, and at its best, wondrous. Castro has produced some of the most daring Australian novels of the last fifteen years, all of which have garnered high praise from critics as well as winning an enviable swag of awards, commencing with the 1983 *Australian/Vogel Award*. Yet despite this high praise, and a plethora of review articles, he remains surprisingly neglected. It is a paradox that someone who has gained so much attention at the time of publication of his novels has received so little formal critical attention from the literary and academic establishment.⁴

At the time of writing this thesis there are no major publications dealing with Castro's work. Aside from reviews at the time of publication, there are few articles in literary journals dealing critically with his work. There is one research thesis that includes a chapter on Castro,⁵ and one research thesis that

³ 'Just Flirting', *Australian Book Review*, no. 171, June 1995, pp. 36-40. This was a National Library Australian Voices Essay: it is not only a provocative essay in a serious forum, but an excellent example of Castro's technique, as cryptic and challenging as his fiction.

⁴ This is despite Castro having some renowned supporters. He has been championed by Helen Daniel, and has had strong support from A.P. Riemer, Peter Fuller and Xavier Pons, inter alia.

⁵ Catherine Bennett, *The Asian Australian Migrant Experience in Australian Literature 1965-1995*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1996. (Chapter 5, 'A Postmodern and Transnational Asian Australian Migrant Identity: Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*, *Pomeroy* and *Drift*', pp. 257-352)

deals with the problems of translating one of his novels into another language.⁶

This thesis provides an overview of Castro's novels. To date these have not been analysed as a body. Castro's writing is here analysed principally in terms of style, technique and themes, but there is also some acknowledgement of the theorists and writers who have influenced his work. Castro is widely read on theoretical and critical issues but states that he rejects theory *qua* theory. Hence in this thesis does not analyse Castro's work in terms of literary theory, but there is a necessary recourse to theorists where their ideas have been influential or where they provide a context for further illumination of texts. The thesis examines the distinctiveness of Castro's writing and assesses his 'place', or contribution to, contemporary Australian writing.

For reasons of space I have not been able to deal with Castro's short stories. Castro is a novelist rather than a short story writer. He realised that, whereas Borges could say 'Why take five hundred pages to develop an idea whose oral demonstration fits into a few minutes?',⁷ Castro requires the longer form.⁸ The short stories could be considered apprentice works, and since graduating to novels Castro has not written further stories. (The dramatic monologue, *Nightsafe Area*, is an exception.) By his own admission, his short stories tend to read like excerpts from a longer work.⁹ The short stories may throw light on the development of his novel writing, but are of limited significance to his

⁶ Fen Liang, *Brian Castro's After China – A Translation into Mandarin and a Study of the Novel's Linguistic and Social Contexts in Australia and China*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1997

⁷ Quoted in the Introduction to *Labyrinths*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 13

⁸ John Barth, a notoriously expansive writer, has argued on behalf of expansiveness, 'There is a narrative metabolism, equally honourable and with at least as long a pedigree, that valorises expansiveness, even extravagance, complication, non-linearity, even telling instead of showing ... and perhaps fabulation or some other admixture of irrationalism over unadulterated realism.' 'It's a Short Story', *Further Fridays, Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction 1984-1994*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1995, pp. 89-103. See also 'It's a Long Story: Maximalism Reconsidered' in the same collection.

⁹ 'When I wrote short stories I realised that all my short stories were episodes of fiction in a larger work ... it isn't the notion of the traditional short story, it doesn't have that self-containedness ... They always look like extracts from a novel.' Interview MD, 29 November 1997. In fact some short stories have been included in his novels: 'The Cave' in an unpublished novel, and 'Carried Away on a Flower Boat' in *After China*.

Nor does Castro write poetry; he has 'tried and failed' in his own terms See 'Brian Castro reads his poetry [*sic*] at ADFA', Appendix 4.

literary corpus. The short stories have not been collected in book form (despite attempts by Castro to interest publishers), nor have they been anthologised. I have not discussed Castro's essays as literary pieces, but used them, as they were intended, to shed light on his novels.

In this thesis I have paid some attention to biographical details, but I have respected the author's wish for privacy and kept this to a minimum. (A brief biographical sketch is included as Appendix 1.) When Castro has included 'autobiographical details' in his work, I have discussed them in context, but I have not constructed a 'biography of Brian Castro'. In his writing Castro has increasingly blurred the distinctions between fact and fiction, and in later chapters I will discuss his views on the fact/fiction divide in novels.

The techniques employed in writing the thesis are those of close reading and textual analysis, with reference to secondary and critical sources where appropriate.

Methodology

The first three chapters provide an introduction to the writing of Brian Castro and deal with broad aspects of his work: specifically, his impulse to write and his philosophical approach to the task of writing, and his writing techniques.

Chapter 4 briefly deals with Australian/'Asian' writing because 'Asia' is an important theme in several of his novels and because Brian Castro is of Asian (and European) extraction. While Castro does not like being labelled 'Asian-Australian', this occurs in the reception of his work and he has had to acknowledge this.

The next six chapters, 5 to 10, deal with each of the novels, in order of publication so that some sense can be made of the progression of Castro's writing, and to allow for some consideration of the novels as self-contained works.

To locate the issues discussed in the opening chapters in relation to the novels, I have considered with each novel one or two issues that are most intimately connected with that particular novel. These issues of course have a

broader relationship with all of Castro's novels, and the distinction is to some extent arbitrary—a structural artifice of the thesis—so I have given cross-references to other novels as necessary.

At the end of each chapter I have summarised the critical reception of the novel under discussion. This is done to show what (skilled) readers made of each novel at the time, and specifically to indicate the wide variety of responses. The reviews analysed shed further light on the preceding discussion in that chapter.

Chapter 11 reviews the six novels as a corpus and draws out some thematic similarities, and discusses Castro's place in the tradition of contemporary Australian experimental writing. While there is a strong argument to be made that Castro is *sui generis*, his work is compared with other contemporary novelists to situate him in a local context.

Several appendixes provide an autobiographical sketch, a brief discussion and list of short stories to indicate the fecundity of Castro's writing, and transcripts of interviews or talks that are not available as published pieces.