

Tim Winton: The Literary and the Popular

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Abstract

The fiction of Australian author Tim Winton is read widely in Australia and China, as well as the U.K. and the U.S.A. However, critics seem to differ as to whether his work should be considered as literary, or whether it is popular. Although Winton's work has received many prizes, including the prestigious Australian Literary prize, the Miles Franklin award, four times, some critics 'worry' about Winton's popular appeal: his use of vernacular, his being read by a wide audience of all ages, his deployment of archetypal (stereotypical?) Australian beach settings, his often nostalgic tone. The argument of this essay is that the categories of literary and popular need vast revision. They are not static categories, and in the twenty-first century need to be reassessed in the light of global reading and entertainment trends and readerships. Winton's work is an excellent test case, as his works constantly play with and flout any rigid definition of 'literary' and 'popular'.

Keywords: Tim Winton, fiction, literary, popular

1. Introduction

Fiction, as a cultural phenomenon, hovers between popular entertainment and "the literary". In debates about the spectrum of values and roles attributed to fiction, "entertainment" often suggests action, plot-driven, genre-based and familiar, while "the literary" is equated with the intellectual, aesthetic, challenging and innovative. In 2008 critic Beth Driscoll described the Australian Federal Government's Books Alive program, which put some of the \$75 million earned each year from the GST on books, as a campaign that "whips up enthusiasm for recreational reading" (Driscoll, 2008). She went further:

Books Alive...models an entertainment-driven version of literary practice. Rather than fostering thoughtful reading, *Books Alive* participates in the blockbuster culture of contemporary

publishing, of marketing hype and mass sales that just may be the key to literature's survival. (Driscoll, 2008)

At first, Driscoll seems to draw a brisk, definitive line between the popular and the literary, aligning the former with market practices and with reliance on "blockbuster" values. However, this is Driscoll's way of seducing "literary-types", making them feel comfortable perhaps that literary values are being upheld, seen as "thoughtful". She then proceeds to muddy the waters that swirl around the categories of popular and literary:

It is a reality that building a market for literature is essential. Literature cannot exist without people prepared to buy it, without vibrant bookstores and well-patronised libraries. Research done before the campaign indicates that one-quarter of Australians rarely read for pleasure. In the first year of *Books Alive*, book sales increased by about 15 per cent compared with the same period in 2002, and organisers claim that the campaign has put 1.2 million books in the hands of readers. *Books Alive's* project of creating a market for literature is truly valuable. (Driscoll, 2008)

Not all will agree with this diagnosis of literature and its relationship to the marketplace. Of course it's good to promote *literacy*, as Driscoll points out, and *Books Alive* does emphasise (and market to) children as readers. But she warns that "*Books Alive's* popularity-oriented approach flattens culture, mixing literary fiction in with true crime and promoting them all like blockbuster films." (Driscoll, 2008). Driscoll's critique of a flattened culture, elaborated in her 2014 monograph *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-first Century*, is brave because it dares to define, or at least give the wide parameters not only of the popular (of which many are writing today) but of "the literary", not always a completely distinct beast. She argues:

Traditionally, prose innovation and intellectual weight have been the foundation of literary reputations. The *Books Alive* panel, in contrast, selects books it describes as "thumping great reads". The campaign's slogan...embraces the devouring, escapist values of pulp fiction—books "you can't put down"—rather than the close, thoughtful reading we associate with the classics. (Driscoll, 2008)

However, "books you can't put down" may also include those being read closely and thoughtfully. Sometimes novels can offer several or all of these possibilities—entertainment *and* thoughtfulness, genre *and* fine writing; yet the critical distinction between "the literary" and "the popular" still fascinates, still causes debates across the globe, amongst scholars and general readers and reviewers. Canadian literary scholar Paul Swirski has argued that, for his profession "...the opinion persists, often as part of an unarticulated and thus unexamined set of background beliefs, that popular fiction has no merit and thus no place in literary studies." (Swirski, 1999, p.2)

2. The Case of Tim Winton

This essay will consider the following question: In what ways is it helpful to consider the works of Australian author Tim Winton as either “literary” or “popular”? His novels are certainly popular—that is, well-promoted nationally and internationally, sold in large numbers—at least among literary-inclined readers (students, teachers, other professionals, middlebrow readers) in China and Australia, the U.K. and the U.S.A.; but Winton’s writing arguably flouts this binarism of popular and literary. His oeuvre embraces multiple forms and genres: children’s books such as *The Bugalugs Bum Thief* (1991); laconic short stories and novellas of childhood and the rites of passage which usher a young boy into adult life, such as *That Eye, the Sky* (1986); and his later, more melancholic or brooding short stories and novels, *The Riders* (1995) and *Dirt Music* (2001) *The Turning* (2005), *Breath* (2008) and *Eyrie* (2013). *The Riders* and *Dirt Music* are dark fables representing loss and grief, the threat, trauma or failure hovering in the lives of children, often carried on into adult life. This dark brooding also marks Winton’s collection of short stories, *The Turning* (2005), a milieu captured by Robert Connolly’s direction of the film adaptation of *The Turning*. *Eyrie* (2013) might also be described in the same way, but it is not as if the darker, brooding, existential aspects of Winton’s oeuvre occur only in the late works. They are not simply the result of the author growing up, or older.

What can we make of this tension in Winton’s fiction? Where and how do the popular (the entertaining, the blockbuster) and the literary (challenging, often disquieting) lock horns in Winton’s work, and in the world of contemporary fiction? So, two connected issues will be raised about Winton’s work: how and if the categories of popular and literary operate in relation to his oeuvre; and the tension between the “sunnier”, iconic, often humorous strain in Winton’s writing, and a more negative undertow which informs many of his works, particularly the later ones. The essay will ask whether there is any correlation between these two aspects, the designation of popular and literary, and the tension between the sunny and the melancholic. This inquiry arises as a concern about what literature is and might be, in the context of a globalized book market, and the ubiquity of multiple forms of popular entertainment in the twenty-first century.

3. *Eyrie*

One way of approaching these interweaving sets of questions is to examine the reception, both scholarly and popular, of Winton’s latest novel *Eyrie*. It is interesting to note that *Eyrie* did not win the 2014 Western Australian Premier’s Award, the state’s top prize, but it did win the People’s Choice Award in that same competition, voted on by the public from amongst the books shortlisted for the Premier’s award. Not in agreement with this popular vote, Catherine Blyth reviewed *Eyrie* for the British daily *The Telegraph* under the title “Overextended and Underdeveloped: A Heartfelt Story of Disillusionment and Salvation Fails to Soar”. She argued that the novel is a failure because, well, it’s *about*

failure, in both theme and narrative structure: “*Eyrie* is like being stuck in a lift with an unusually eloquent one, receiving a lecture on humanity’s vileness while you wait for a story to get things moving” (Blyth, online). Is the inference here that “readers” don’t want vileness, and they certainly don’t want it in a story that has no narrative drive, no action? Blyth sets up the narrative trajectory of the novel in this succinct way:

Tom Keely, a lapsed environmentalist, is hungover, again. Jobless, wifeless and childless, he measures out his days in booze, painkillers and bad breakfasts. Outside it is “hot enough to kill an asbestos sparrow”, so mostly he lurks in his eyrie, a tiny flat in a benighted tower block. It is 2008 and mineral-rich Western Australia, “Leviathan with an irritable bowel”, is being eviscerated for China’s industrial revolution. (Blyth, online)

It’s a racy, apt summary and offers us quoted glimpses of Winton’s humorous vernacular skills. Self-contradictorily, Blyth tends here to make us see that there’s a *great deal* going on in the novel: international deals in the economy and with the environment, and other kinds of melancholic, personal deals at the individual level. So where does the problem seem to lie, for Blyth? It’s to the narrative “torpor”, the failure to solve anything, that Blyth objects:

Tension is generated through longing and fear, sometimes beautifully: a beating is remembered by “the exploded feeling in his cheek”. There are insights into corruption and the pilfering of the stricken land. But Winton’s hovering over so many fascinating avenues, while refusing to nose down them, grows frustrating. (Blyth, online)

The reviewer wants to read *action and solution*. With her own dose of vernacular language, Blyth wants the author to “nose down” the many avenues set up by the narrative. To stop hovering and stalling. To stop “frustrating” the narrative-hungry reader. This scenario is a possible starting point for an understanding of the difference (for Blyth, at least) between the popular and the literary. But before it can be thought about as this, it’s interesting to fully enumerate the qualities that Blyth is calling for: more action, something resolved, a “nosing down” into all the possible “fascinating avenues” raised in the novel but not pursued. Is this a calling for more “popular” techniques (action, colour, narrative drive, keeping readers entertained), and less heavy, thoughtful, literary material?

In response, I would stand with Swirski in seeking to complicate the distinctions between popular and literary fiction. Swirski’s passionate argument to his own peers in literary scholarship offers empirical and polemical evidence that the distinction between the popular and the literary is a wavering, volatile one. He concludes his argument in this way:

Much of popular fiction can stand on its own feet next to many works hailed as lasting triumphs of Western literature. Much more deserves to be treated as the only thing it tries to be: gripping but ephemeral entertainment without aspirations to bowl over the literary

establishment. Some of it is demonstrable schlock, which makes the task of educating the readers who persist in buying it all the more worthwhile. But to tell a good popular novel from a bad one, or a good popular novel from a bad classic, we need to approach contemporary literature—in whatever form or genre it chooses to manifest itself—with an unjaundiced eye and a critical apparatus of sufficient refinement. (Swirski, 1999, p. 12)

Swirski here is writing in defence of many kinds of writing along the popular-literary spectrum, and of their diverse cultural value. He does not deny that there *are* distinctions to be made between the popular and the literary, but he also probes the many *commonalities* and overlaps between them. He's not afraid of seeing some work (popular and literary) as "schlock". What he does call for is an astute critical reading that can evaluate a work (that is, discuss its comparative values and achievements) in a dialectical manner, across the popular-literary divide so often set up in concrete.

The reviewer of *Eyrie*, in criticizing its "overextension" (this seems to imply over-aestheticization, and/or too many ideas and not enough plot satisfaction) and lack of action, here seems to be in the opposite camp to Swirski. Whether consciously or unknowingly, Blyth is calling for what are traditionally popular, entertaining action-led fictions, decrying the do-nothing, verbally overpowering but underachieving hero:

...this novel is the sequel to a gripping unwritten tale, in which Keely took on big business and lost his beliefs. By contrast, as a meditation on the salvation business...[t]he cheap thrills of heroism are called into question, but it is all a little worthy, and the treatment feels both overextended and underdeveloped. (Blyth, online)

In other words, the reviewer wants more action hero in her hypothetical prequel (taking on big business, losing beliefs), rather than what she calls *Eyrie*'s "meditation on the salvation business." However, what if readers are interested in language, in belief (lost or found), in meditation about values, and in questioning the expected, ubiquitous and popular action-man hero? Does this mean such readers are highbrow, literary, and potentially scornful of popular writing?

What is fascinating about this review is that it fails to notice that the novel is actually a funny, provocative parody of the action man, but also more sweepingly of the genre of crime fiction. *Eyrie* weaves together meditation and internal monologue, on the one hand, and pithy representations of petty thugs, and the recriminations of the underworld drug-scene, seeing them as part of a common world of political corruption, big business, and the drama of spiritual values. In other words, could it be that *Eyrie* is playing fast and loose with both popular and literary themes and approaches, with a wide range of narrative and genre techniques? The existentialist drama of Tom Keely, who blunders from hero to loser, from idealist to misanthrope, from activist to passive victim, to (not so secret) agent, makes this, in my reading of *Eyrie*, a highly developed, playful *and* serious production. Is it popular or literary? Does it matter? Is it Blyth's sequel to her much more

exciting, hypothetical prequel? It depends where you are looking for your excitement.

4. *That Eye, the Sky*

It is just so in many of Winton's novels, where we are reading about the *aftermath* of loss and trauma. Meditation, retrospectivity, interior drama are the stamp of many of Winton's works, rather than immediate action. The beautiful, early novel *That Eye, the Sky* achieves its narrative "drive" through its "emotion recollected in tranquility", its retrospectivity, even as it is narrated in the present tense by Ort, the young boy who fears he is losing his father after a near-fatal accident:

It took me and mum ages to put him to bed.... We had to roll him and drag him like a feed sack, push him, pull him. There's his heel marks in the dust on the floorboards in the hall. How are we gonna keep it up? How? What do we do to get him fixed? He's not bad you know. He's done nothing bad. My dad kisses me good night and he puts his fingers in my hair and tells me stories and shows how to do things that you don't normally think of.... (Winton, *That Eye*, p. 50)

The novel creates a moment in time impacted by loss and fear, the recollections narrated by a child who will carry all the sadness – his father's accident, his mother's grief, the family's seeking and not finding solace – into an unclear future: "What do we do to get him fixed?" This moment in time is crafted carefully, with its movements back and forth between past and present tenses almost imperceptible. Its rising fear and loss of control told in child-like vernacular – the boy's passionate defense of his father's goodness; his recounting in sensuous terms the goodness of his father, his fingers touching, his voice storytelling. Present and past and future are wound together here in a prose that touches chords of nostalgia, but goes beyond. Published in 1986, *That Eye, the Sky* captures a late hippy, urban-fringe, bush-dwelling moment of time that readers in the 80s and thereafter may well register for its "pastness", but equally, for the child's hope and effort to create or sustain a future.

Whether this novel, and many of Winton's meditative works, can be placed (or dismissed) as "nostalgic", readers and critics will determine. While very little *happens* in this moment of time—as the father lies in a coma; as the self-proclaimed prophet and miracle worker Henry Warburton farcically stumbles and fails at all he takes on; and as the church members can offer no real welcome or solace—a great deal actually does happen, including an imagining of the possibility of miracle and resurrection. However, in terms of action and plot, this "fascinating avenue" of miracle is not "nosed down" but only suggested, as the novel ends:

Everywhere, in through all my looking places and the places I never even thought of – under the doors, up through the boards – that beautiful cloud creeps in. This house is filling with light and crazy music and suddenly I know what's going to happen and it's like the whole flaming

world's suddenly making sense for a second.... (p. 150)

In a rapid-fire stream of consciousness narration Ort witnesses what is *about to happen*: the impossible, the hoped-for, and even resurrection, just as the novel ends. *That Eye, the Sky* is simultaneously humorous and vernacular, epiphanic, lacking in action, but promising much. Is it popular or literary fiction? Or both? Some critics have placed the novel as genre writing (adolescent fiction), while others read it as adult fiction with a child narrator. It doesn't seem to matter.

5. *Cloudstreet*

As well as being a little confused by the genres of Winton's fiction, scholars of Australian literature certainly do not agree when it comes to the value of Winton's overall contribution, and long may it be. After all, values—both aesthetic and ontological—are at stake in these debates. In his essay on Winton's 1991 novel *Cloudstreet*, scholar Robert Dixon describes the novel in this way:

Winton is quite explicit... about the novel's nostalgia for lost places, for an Australian accent and culture that are pre-American, pre-modern, pre-1960s.... This goes a long way toward explaining the popularity of the novel, at least for a certain generation of readers, the baby boomers, who were the major cultural force in the 1990s, when the novel was published. But nostalgia is by its very nature conservative: it prefers the past to the future; it is at best ambivalent about modernity; it prefers the local and the traditional to the global. (Dixon, 2005, p. 247)

"Nostalgia" is one of those hinge words, variously used as positive and negative. While nostalgia might be enjoyed by many, especially when it comes to popular cultural consumption, Dixon's critique suggests that it is sub-intellectual, sentimental, or merely emotional, as opposed to thoughtful or future-oriented. Certainly Dixon is not using the word to congratulate Winton. The critic lumps nostalgia in with popularity and conservatism here, describing such traits as a preference for the past over the future, a shunning of modernity and the global for the (presumably) comforting avenues of pastness, tradition, and the local. I want to suggest that the genre-mixing playfulness of *Cloudstreet*, its cutting back and forward between farce and realism, between magic realism (the talking pig!) and documentary (the Nedlands murders), between nostalgia, and plain old shame at the shabbiness and failures of the past, between the popular and the literary, makes *Cloudstreet* a lot more than Dixon's description allows.

Where, for instance, on the spectrum of popular and literary, nostalgic and future-oriented, do readers place the character and story of Fish Lamb, the brain-injured boy who never grew to manhood? Fish is loved, tolerated, cared for; but he is also an aching burden in the lives of his family members, a child stuck in childhood. He will never know the full promise or pain of his future life. His boyhood accident and its consequences

are the beginning of suffering and disbelief in his religious family; but they are also the source of wonder and longing invoked by the novel for something better than the partial, hurt world, a longing which circles round and round in this novel and is never simply nostalgic. The disembodied narrator at the end of the novel observes Fish in the backyard where he pats his pet pig:

Down in the yard at Cloudstreet, down there in the halls and channels of time Fish and the pig exchange glances.... But I can't read your face. I stare back at you in the puddles on the chilly ground, I'm waiting in your long monastic breath, I travel back to these moments to wonder at what you're feeling and come away with nothing but the knowledge of how it will be in the end. You're coming to me, Fish, and all you might have been, all you could have hoped for.... No shadows, no ugliness, no hurtings, no falling down angry. Your turn is coming. (Winton, *Cloudstreet*, pp. 529-30)

Readers are momentarily made to stop and wonder who this intimate, ghostly narrator is, and realize with a shock that it is Fish himself, speaking from another, imagined dimension. The scene is in a broadly realist genre (vernacular dialogue, inner monologue/stream of consciousness, domestic setting), but it arguably bursts out of this generic classification. There is farce here too, as the boy exchanges glances with his talking pig, but this passage disturbs any purely literary, aesthetic reading. There is also an ontological, meditative questioning in the writing, as it looks both backwards and forwards along “the halls and channels of time”, suggesting the not-yet, the possible out of the impossible, in its longing—its long sentences and their “long monastic breath”. Readers are asked to flow *with* the strangeness of the narrative: an internal monologue of a damaged boy, grown into an awkward adult body but deprived of full life, who is being addressed by another self, one who exists, whole, beyond the shadowed, hurting world. It is the inner monologue of a no-longer existing character who sees more than all the living characters, and offers up a prayer, a hope, a dream of fulfillment, of: “Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me” (p. 558). There is little action here, but a kind of quotidian, vernacular meditation, a writing that draws on both popular and literary techniques woven intimately together, so that it seems irrelevant, or just inept, to place the novel in one strict category or the other.

Cloudstreet is often described as Australia's favourite novel in readers' polls, such as the survey of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's viewers' *First Tuesday Book Club* (2012). The novel was made into a television mini-series, and was adapted to the stage. For Australian playwright Nick Enright, co-author of the stage script of *Cloudstreet*, “People get that look in their eye, that *Cloudstreet* look”. For him, the novel has “leapt the fence in Australia, it's in the bloodstream of the nation” (qtd. in Morrison, 2014, p. 1). Enright's metaphor—“the bloodstream of the nation”—is poetic, arguably seeking to surmount the polemics surrounding definitions of popular and literary. Enright seemingly wants to draw the two together, and many viewers would agree that the stage play, highly popular for the

duration of its performances in Australia, Britain and the U.S., does just that.

Cloudstreet, as well as *That Eye, the Sky*, also addresses the second question raised at the beginning of this essay, how to consider the sunny, celebratory, poetic and epiphanic elements in Winton's writing, in comparison to the darker, more melancholy aspects. Fish Lamb is a poignant, lumbering, painful creation, but finally his fate is reconciled, with a gesture towards hope. The narrative promises him that somewhere, somehow, he will become "...Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me" (p. 558). Just so his brother, Quick Lamb, who grieves for his brother and understands in his depths the pain of existence, finally reconciles all the characters through his marriage to Rose, the daughter of the "other" family, and their giving birth of their child, "Wax" Harry in what could be called a full-blown comic, celebratory dénouement. This is the popular, fulfilling narrative outcome of comic saga. Tragic elements such as the fate of the Indigenous characters, earlier inhabitants of the house in *Cloudstreet*, and of the land, are muted (some critics would say not adequately developed) in the narrative undertow towards reconciliation and rebirth.

6. Conclusion

However, the darker elements hinted at in *Cloudstreet* are present in more startling, less reconciled ways in later Winton novels and short stories. It is arguable that *Cloudstreet*, together with its adaptations, was as popular as well as literary *pinnacle* for Winton. Between 2001 and 2013, Winton published four demonstrably darker works: *Dirt Music*, *The Turning*, *Breath*, and *Eyrie*, none of which offer comic conclusions. However, while the wide popularity of *Cloudstreet* has not been repeated, Winton has gathered critical success, winning Australia's top literary prize, The Miles Franklin Award, four times, for *Shallows* (1984); *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and *Breath*, and being shortlisted for the Booker Prize (U.K.), for *The Riders* and *Dirt Music*.

What follows from the fact that the latter half of Winton's career has produced a range of darker works that focus on trauma, loss, failure, grief, and regret? Winton remains a top-selling author but his reputation still swings between "popular" and "literary" amongst critics. New York-based reviewer Alison McCulloch has a very different reading of *Eyrie* to that of Blyth. McCulloch writes of Tom Keely, the central character of *Eyrie*, who is a failure in multiple ways, personally and politically:

His is a familiar plight in the literature of despair, but it's one that Winton has made over anew for this time and place. And in his hands, with his distinctive Australian voice and vernacular, this disquieting story also has the power to surprise and delight—perhaps even inspire. (McCulloch, online)

"The literature of despair"? Is it a step too far to describe Winton's later work in this way? Or, if this seems a reasonable description of certain strands in Winton's work, what then does this suggest about readers' reception of its "disquieting" power? Do

literary readers want to be disquieted, challenged, confronted (as against those seeking entertainment)? Some do, and, it seems, McCulloch is one of them. Of course readers of novels are a diverse cohort. Some want the challenge of such disquiet – which may lead to “surprise and delight”, or not – but other readerly responses often include: “life’s black enough, I want to read for escape”, or “I don’t want to be depressed by what I read...”; or, like Blyth, “I want plot, narrative, action...”; or, I need to like the characters in order to be involved.” These kinds of responses are commonplace, often repeated by readers. However, Winton continues to be awarded prizes, and to be read in large enough numbers for it to be argued that there are readers out there, Australian, Chinese, American, Canadian and British, who read Winton as *both* popular and literary: for the vibrant – and yes, often disquieting – plurality of his fictional techniques: his often lyrical, aesthetically-rich prose; its generic weaving and ducking; its moving, challenging squadron of characters – surfers, lovers, beachcombers, losers, drunks, bashed women, left over hippies, loving mothers, lonely wanderers; its vernacular humour; its meditative insights.

Literary critics, as Swirski has argued, need to become more adept at reading books that refuse to settle down into either “popular” or “literary” categories, into either the literature of sunny, surfing celebration, or the literature of despair. Winton’s contribution telescopes, kaleidoscopes, these simple categories. As a master craftsman of prose he is able to weave in and out, and beyond, such fixed and static binaries. He is able to take the reader with him because he doesn’t forget either end of this spectrum along which fiction continues to move. He is, in summary, a writer of literature in a global book marketplace.

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