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Robert Dixon: Tim Winton, Cloudstreet and the field of Australian Literature

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Let me begin by saying what I'm *not* going to do in this paper: I'm not going to do what used to be called a “close reading” of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*. I'm not going to wheel out a theoretical approach through which to interpret the text, as if the reading I could produce by that means were somehow more authoritative than any other. Instead, what I will do is situate Winton's career and this particular novel in what can be called the field of Australian literature. In using this term field, I mean to indicate the whole system involved in the production and reception of Australian literature. This is now a very broad spectrum of institutions, personnel, practices and values that is surprisingly complex and diverse. It is now so extensive that it isn't even confined to Australia. And academic literary criticism — in the sense of theoretically-driven textual analysis — is only one part of that field. Many would say that it's not even the most important part.

This idea of a “field” derives from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.[1] Much of Bourdieu's work was done on French art culture of the nineteenth century, but it has been widely used in recent years as a tool for thinking about how other culture industries work, including print culture, cinema and music. When Bourdieu talks about a field of cultural production, he means to identify the entire set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions that work in combination to shape its possibilities and outcomes. In the case of print culture, these include the publishing houses that produce and distribute books; the bodies that award literary prizes; the government departments that give grants and frame cultural policy; the shops that sell books; the reading groups in which books are variously discussed; the mass media that report on books and writers, including newspapers, radio and television; and the schools and universities, which set courses, select some books and writers above others, and publish literary criticism in scholarly journals. Working in these different institutions, each with its own values and practices, is a range of personnel involved in books and writing: they include authors, literary agents, editors, publicists, reviewers, academics and school teachers. As David Carter observes, in the last twenty years, the field of Australian literature has achieved a certain maturity or “density” that allows it to be self-sustaining in relation to other fields, including the global print economy.[2]

This account is not meant to be comprehensive or even theoretically rigorous, but it gives some idea of the field of cultural production that both enables and constrains what it is possible for a writer like Tim Winton to achieve. *Cloudstreet* does not have a single and definitive meaning. Rather, it is a textual site that lends itself, albeit actively rather than passively, to a variety of uses. It is a commodity produced by many hands that circulates through a range of institutions and practices, and which comes to have many different meanings and uses as it circulates through the field. A good deal of a book's meaning is produced by what the French critic Gerard Genette calls *paratext*: that is, the “heterogenous group of practices and devices” that mediate a book to its readers, ensuring its “presence in the world,” its “reception” and “consumption.” These comprise both *peritext* (the devices located inside the book, such as chapter titles, prefaces and epigraphs) and *epitext* (the devices located in the physical and social space outside the book, generally with the help of the media and the web, such as interviews, promotional dossiers, and weblogs).[3] The field of Australian literature is so diverse that it puts different tastes, values and preferences in competition with each other. Editors and publicists, for example, don't have the same “vision” for a book as its author, but they make an important contribution to its eventual realisation. Newspaper reviewers do not value the same books as university lecturers, and they tend to use and interpret them in different ways. These divisions within the field also affect us as individuals. I might want to say very different things about *Cloudstreet* if I were in a university English tutorial as opposed to a book group in a friend's lounge room. I might read it very differently on my Christmas holidays at the beach to the way I would when preparing an article about it. This

means that there is no single kind of reader or way of reading — rather, there are different ways of reading that any one individual might practise in different situations.

Academic literary critics are often reluctant to concede that there are more important influences in the field of literary production than themselves. But the reality is that the academy has had a powerful influence in shaping literary taste for only a relatively short period of time. In Australia it was not until 1950s that the universities began to teach Australian literature and to shape its values. In the case of the secondary school classroom, it was not until the 1960s or even 1970s that Australian novels, poems and plays made their appearance alongside Shakespeare, Dickens and TS Eliot. Prior to this time — roughly the mid-twentieth century — it was more likely to be the journalists and free-lance public intellectuals who had the greatest influence. This was the situation Patrick White wrote about in 1968, recalling his return to Australia from London in 1947:

> *In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is.*[4]

As recently as 1958, then, Patrick White was lamenting precisely the *absence* of the complex and mature literary system I've just described. Ironically, it could be argued that academics today are once again losing ground as arbiters of literary taste, as general readers look to other sources such as newspaper reviews, radio programs and reading groups.

Tim Winton

Let's turn now to Tim Winton's place in this field. I'm not going to attempt a comprehensive biography of Winton for the same reason that I'm not going to do a full critical analysis of the novel — this is because literary biography, like literary criticism, is just one among many ways to approach books and authors. But we do need a few facts in order to map Winton's career on to the field.[5] What we want to understand is how the phenomenon we call “Tim Winton” is an artifact of — that is, something produced by — the system of Australian literature.

Winton was born in Perth in 1960. He spent his early life there and at Albany on the far south coast of WA. During the late 1970s and early 1980s he was among the first students to graduate from a new course in creative writing at WAIT, the West Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). Creative writing courses are now common in Australian universities, but at the time it was among the first of its kind. Winton became a professional writer in 1981 when, at the age of 21, he shared first prize in the *Australian*/ Vogel National Literary Award for what become his first novel, *An Open Swimmer* (1982). Winton now has national and international reputations, and his books have been translated into other languages and adapted for the stage. *Cloudstreet* (1991) in particular has attracted major attention, and has been set widely on university and secondary school curricula. Some reviewers in the early 1990s asked whether it might be “the Great Australian Novel.”[6]

Winton began writing *Cloudstreet* in Paris while staying in an apartment maintained by the Literature Board of the Australia Council to give Australian writers an opportunity to live in Europe. The Literature Board is the major institution, dating back to the 1970s, through which public funds are granted in support of creative writing. As the acknowledgements page of almost all his books will show, Winton has been a frequent recipient of Australia Council grants. He has also won a staggering number of national and international literary awards, some of them worth tens of thousands of dollars. *Cloudstreet* received the National Book Council Award, the West Australian Premier's Award and the Miles Franklin Literary Award. In 2003 the Australian Society of Authors conducted a poll to determine the top 40 Australian books. *Cloudstreet* was rated number 1 and *Dirt Music* number 4. Patrick White and David Malouf also made it into the top 10. Surprisingly, perhaps, Peter Carey did not, with *Oscar and Lucinda* appearing at number 11.[7]

These few dates and facts reveal the relation between Winton's career and the history of the field. Winton was born at almost exactly the time when Australian literature became institutionalised as a marketing category, as an object of government policy, and as a field of study in schools and universities. He

went to university to study creative writing at exactly the time when such courses were being established. He wrote his first novel, won a prize for it and had it published during a period of massive and unprecedented growth in the system of prizes and grants that arose to foster Australian literature. And he went on to be a regular recipient of Australia Council funding. In other words, Winton's career corresponds exactly with what David Carter calls the moment of “maturity” or “density” of the Australian literary system.

What would have happened if Winton had not been born into this mature system? We can get some idea by looking briefly at the career of the person who taught him creative writing at WAIT. As a young student in the late 1970s, Winton was taught by the novelist Elizabeth Jolley. The differences between their careers are startling. Jolley was born in England in 1923 and emigrated to Perth in 1959. She arrived in Australia to find what Patrick White had just described as “the Great Australian Emptiness.” She'd been writing for years but couldn't find a publisher and had to work as a nurse, a real estate agent, and at various other jobs before being appointed as a tutor in creative writing at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1974. Later she became a key figure in setting up the new course at WAIT. Although Jolley had been writing for many years, her first book was not published until 1976, when she was well into her 50s. From that point a flood of books was published, some written long before, and her reputation soared during the 1980s, a decade now regarded as a golden age for Australian women writers. Now although there are many reasons why Elizabeth Jolley was relatively slow to publish and achieve fame, one of the major reasons that both her career and Winton's took off exactly when they did was because they corresponded with a key moment in the growth and maturity of the field of Australian literature. Winton's career, in other words, like Jolley's very different career, can be seen as an artifact of this field — that is, as something both enabled and constrained by it — something literally made possible by its enormous expansion in the 1970s.

The Tim Winton Phenomenon

To understand more about the Tim Winton phenomenon, I want now to ask, which elements of the literary system have been most active in enabling his success? I'm curious about whether his success has been academic or what we might think of in the broadest sense as “popular.” In other words, has it been the universities and academic critics that have contributed most to his reputation? Or have those elements of the system *outside* the universities been more important? Here again, the contrast between his career and Elizabeth Jolley's is instructive.

Jolley's reputation is sustained by those sections of the field associated with “the literary.' Her books have attracted mainly theoretically-driven (especially post-structuralist and feminist), text-based readings by academic critics, but they are not widely “popular” in the sense that Winton's are, and not all of them have remained in print.[8] Winton, on the other hand, has had surprisingly few academic articles written about his books: Andrew Taylor's article in *Australian Literary Studies* is a rare exception.[9] But he has been very widely set on undergraduate and secondary school curricula, he maintains a constant presence in the mass media, and he is a favourite with reading groups and the educated general reader. Readings of his works have been less theoretical and text-based, preferring instead author-centered, thematic and regional approaches. Where writing about Jolley's novels has appeared as critical analysis in scholarly books and journals, writing about Winton turns up most often in the form of interviews, feature articles in newspapers and magazines, and on radio and television.

Let's look at the evidence for this. The electronic database *Austlit* lists hundreds of “works about” Tim Winton — round 400 in fact. But very few of theme are academic books or articles published in serious literary journals. The vast bulk of this *epitext* is short articles in the mass media, especially newspaper, magazine and radio reviews, and notices about his many awards. Second to this is a large amount of biographical material, especially author profiles and interviews. Even a cursory look at the media reports shows that they come in waves, reflecting the publicity campaigns associated with the promotion of new titles and the annual cycle of literary prizes. This is now one of the most important components driving the literary system as a whole. The novelist Kate Grenville has said that “Prizes give writers headlines in a society where writing doesn't usually make headlines. This society doesn't value writing as much as we'd like it to, but it does value competition.”[10] Prizes impress publishers. They know they can use them to promote an author. And the media are fully complicit in publicising awards, especially if they create controversy

or heated responses. There have been numerous scandals and controversies such as the Demidenko affair of 1995–6. The number and variety of Australian literary awards continues to grow, but there are a select few that are capable of creating a reputation, endowing critical acclaim and attracting constant waves of media attention. These are the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the New South Wales and Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, the Banjo Awards (prior to 1988 known as the National Book Council Awards), the *Australian*/Vogel Award, and the Children's Book Council Awards. Winton has won most of them at one time or another. I find Kate Grenville's choice of the word “competition” interesting — she realises that this part of the system is governed by the logic and values of the market place, with its competitions and top-ten lists, all of which exist to promote authors and books as commodities.

The secondary schools curriculum

Another element of Winton's success has been the penetration of his books into the lucrative secondary school curriculum. Writers and publishers are especially keen to crack this high volume market, where books are sold as class sets. Being set on courses has two important consequences for sales: it makes sales figures high, and it extends the sale period beyond the year of release, keeping titles in print sometimes for decades. Some Australian authors have virtually based their careers and reputations around the secondary curriculum. It would not be difficult to draw up two distinct lists, one of “literary authors,” whose works are not often set in schools but are often out of print, and one of “school text” authors who are rarely out of print. The poet Bruce Dawe is a leading example. Dawe's reputation as Australia's favourite poet derives substantially from his long association with the secondary school curriculum. His publisher, Longman, is a textbook specialist and does not otherwise publish poetry. Dawe's *Collected Poems* has never been out of print and sells in massive numbers. Yet his career and reputation are artifacts of this niche market, and he does not have quite the status in the tertiary sector that he does in the secondary sector. By contrast, more “literary” writers like Patrick White and Christina Stead are rarely set in high schools because their novels are regarded as “difficult.” Even though White is our only Nobel Prize winner, his most famous novels are often out of print.

Like Bruce Dawe, Tim Winton has now established himself in this important niche market. And like Dawe, this is reflected in the kinds of books and articles that are written about him. To date there have been three books about Winton, and these reflect his popularity with the general rather than the academic reader, and with the undergraduate and secondary school curricula.[11] Academic criticism often takes a text-centered approach and has been driven in recent years by theories like poststructuralism, feminism and deconstruction. By contrast, the issues and approaches that dominate the three books about Winton are author-centered and thematic, focusing especially on biographical and regional issues. These approaches are more representative of the secondary curriculum. *Reading Tim Winton*, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lynn Jacobs, is typical. It begins with a selection of quotations from Winton's many interviews, organised thematically according to his life story, his regional background, and his family-centered and Christian values. These author-centered issues are set up in Winton's own voice, then echoed in a series of readings of the major novels, including *Cloudstreet*.

Author-centered and thematic approaches are also reflected in the many Winton web sites. Type “Tim Winton” into Google and you'll come up with two main kinds of site: first, publishers and book-sellers' promotional material, and second, sites relating to Winton resources for the secondary school and undergraduate class room. For example, Trinity College, a private secondary school in Perth, keeps an on-line resources site to assist high school teachers and their students to teach and study Winton and his books.[12] There are no links to academic articles. But there are hot links to publishers' sites, interviews with radio and TV journalists, news items about his prize wins, and short reviews by students and fans. There are even sites where essays can be downloaded for a fee, tailor-made to assignment topics.[13] There are also web sites by school students exchanging views about their favourite author. At this level of fandom, Winton operates much like a popular TV star in a show like *Neighbours* — to which *Cloudstreet*, significantly enough, has sometimes been compared. Here's a blog kept by a fan:

> *Tim Winton is my favourite Australian author. The man is a creative genius. He writes as himself, a Western Australian bloke who spent his early childhood in Perth before being*

transplanted into the country when his Dad was stationed to a town called Albany on the south-west coast…

I've just seen a fascinating interview between Winton and Andrew Denton on Enough Rope, and am looking forward to reading The Turning, a collection of short stories that has just been published.[14]

Notice how fandom operates. The approach here is not "literary" or theoretical or text-based. Fans read Winton biographically, assuming that his novels are a transparent expression of his life. Note too the ease with which fans move from Winton's persona and novels to his other media manifestations such as the appearance on the Andrew Denton show. And finally, note the promotional aspect, the link to the latest Winton title. This is typical of the way celebrity operates in the mass-media. For Tim Winton, we could substitute Britney Spears, Brad Pitt or David Beckham.

Literary celebrity and the public sphere

In talking about literary celebrity, I'm drawing now on the important work of Graeme Turner.[15] Turner has shown how books and literary celebrity are caught up in the representational systems of the mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Publicity and promotion are now part of the author's profession. Successful authors are expected not only to make regular appearances at universities and writers' festivals, but also in the pages of the weekend newspapers and on television chat shows. Peter Carey turns up in *Elle* magazine, Thomas Keneally on *Burke's Backyard*, David Malouf on breakfast television, and Tim Winton on *Enough Rope*.[16] But the literary discourses favoured in the media are not those of the literary academy. In fact they are frequently anti-academic, and particularly hostile to theoretical modes of literary enquiry. Graeme Turner gives the example of David Malouf being interviewed by Liz Hayes on Channel 9's *Today* show. When asked what his latest novel was "about," Malouf was clearly embarrassed at having to come up with a simple answer. Liz Hayes did her best but was visibly uncomfortable when Malouf began, "It's about the Latin poet, Ovid …"[17]

It would be interesting to compare the public media personas of Australian authors. Winton's is obviously very different to Malouf's. Malouf appears as a sage-like, cosmopolitan man of letters. Winton is younger, and more down-home and folksy. An important part of his persona has been his physical appearance, which is a constant theme of the many interviews and newspaper articles about him. There is a distinct Winton look: the plaited pony tail, the flannel shirt or T-shirt, the jeans and the Blundstone boots. And there is his love of fishing and the sea, his close family life and his Christianity. What do these signs mean? At first, they appear to signify a young or at least young-ish author. But is it really fashionable now for a man in his mid 40s to have a pony tail? The "real" trendy young authors of the 1990s, the so—called "grunge" novelists, lived in inner Sydney or Melbourne; they had spiky hair and body piercings; they talked about hip hop, not rock and roll; sex and substance abuse, not fishing. Winton's persona, then, signifies not a radical young writer, but a slightly old-fashioned identity committed to regional and working—class traditions; one resistant to the postmodern and metropolitan trends of inner Sydney and Melbourne, someone who espouses tradition, family life and Christian values, which are associated with regional rather than urban Australia. In a number of interviews Winton has sought to distance himself from the Sydney and Melbourne literati, and from academic literary networks. These themes are inscribed in *Cloudstreet* in Rose Pickles's brief flirtation with the aspiring modernist poet Toby Raven and their humiliation at the hands of Perth's literati, who gather in the University suburb of Nedlands.

Is Winton, then, one of the Great Australian Authors? If we take Malouf as an example, the Great Writer is usually male, intellectual, metropolitan and sage-like, with interests in high culture. Women writers cannot easily assume this mantle. As Gina Mercer has shown, Helen Garner is usually gendered as emotional rather than intellectual, and her novel *The Children's Bach* (1984) was considered too "small" and "slight" to be a Great Novel.[18] Similarly, Winton is regional rather than metropolitan, physical and intuitive rather than intellectual, young and egalitarian rather than sage-like and elitist; he likes rock music, not opera. Winton's down-home, regional and populist persona may therefore be a barrier to academic or literary Greatness which, in any event, he openly rejects.

Cloudstreet

So far I've been trying to work out which parts of the national literary system have been most active as *paratext* in mediating Winton's reputation. It is important, though, not to fall into a naive determinism, which would see the author and the text as passively produced by the system. In fact, as we've just seen, the author is actively involved in providing a product — both the persona and the text — which has positive attributes that are attractive to the system, or to certain parts of it.

Let's try to think, then, about *Cloudstreet* as contributing actively to its own reception. What kind of book is going to be successful in this system? What kinds of qualities will it need to achieve success in this field, or within certain of its niches? What kinds of stylistic and thematic features will be preferred? In particular, what were the tastes and interests of the Australian literary system as a whole during the period when the novel was written and first received — the late 1980s and early 1990s?

As a novel conceived, written and received during the decade around 1990, *Cloudstreet* was much affected by the moment of 1988, the Bicentenary of European settlement in Australia. In so far as the Bicentenary affected the arts, it created a distinct climate of expectations, values and interests that can be seen reflected in the literature of that period.[19] I'd note the following interests, in no particular order:

- an interest in the Australian “identity” at all its levels, and the ways in which they might be connected — regional, national and international; or, to put this another way, an interest in achieving, simultaneously, a sense of Australian regionalism, nationalism and internationalism

- related to this, a fascination with history, with Australian traditions and their place in the modern world

- an interest in certain affective qualities to be achieved and performed at this time, such as “nationalism,” “celebration,” “community” and “consensus.”

What kind of book would fulfill these interests?

- an historical novel of considerable scope and substance

- an historical novel demonstrating the connections between the regional, the national and the international

- a novel tracing the relation between tradition and modernisation

- a novel that celebrates the extraordinary in the ordinary, the transcendent in the material

- a novel about community

- a novel whose style and concerns could be read back into the tradition of the Great Australian Novel, but also forward into international print culture

- a novel that would appeal “consensually” to popular, middle brow and high brow readers

- a book and an author that formed a “saleable” and prize-worthy package at this time, that could be marketed, celebrated and “loved.”

In approaching *Cloudstreet*, then, there is a strong expectation that a Great Australian Novel must be grounded in a regional or local identity, while also attaining more national or universal significance. This is especially so with writing from West Australia, which has a strong sense of its regional identity. Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1968), for example, was taught in schools and undergraduate university courses for many years. It is about a boy growing up in Geraldton on the coast north of Perth, then moving to Perth as a young man. More recently, Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976) and *The Bodysurfers* (1983) established Perth, the Swan River and the city's beaches as a character in fiction. Winton has acknowledged these regional influences.

The sense of the national emerging out of the regional is artfully inscribed in *Cloudstreet* by the two initial settings with which it opens, and the two families' moves to Perth. The Pickles begin in Geraldton, the setting of Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, while the Lambs move up to Perth from Margaret River in the south, whose Karri and Jarra forests were the subject of another WA classic, Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* (1926). The plot, then, folds the regional into the urban, the traditional into the modern. In the Perth suburb of West Leederville, the two families both encounter and resist modernisation — World War Two and the coming of the Americans, the Bay of Pigs crisis, the assassination of Kennedy, the coming of modern supermarkets and the new brick suburbs. The plot of Winton's saga enfolds the regional in the national, the traditional in the modern. Put another way, it discovers the regional *as* national.

This theme is doubled, at another level, by the novel's discovery of the extraordinary within the ordinary, its quest for metaphysical transcendence within ordinary Australian life. This is a central theme of *Cloudstreet*. The metaphysical is folded into the physical and the everyday, just as the regional is folded into the urban, via the river. The Swan River is a conduit, bringing traditional Australian life in to the modern city, and also a switching point between the physical and the spiritual. We see this in the celebrated boating episode, when Fish Lamb looks down into the river and up into the stars at the same time. Ordinary family life is seen as sacred and devotional. Although *Cloudstreet* is therefore set in urban Perth on the cusp of modernisation, it is as if the modern urban world does not quite exist for these two families: regional life-ways, and the forces of the natural and even supernatural worlds are channeled right inside the city by the all-pervasive water of the river and its relation to the night sky. The novel's spiritual quest for atonement parallels the Bicentennial quest for social consensus and community. These two levels, the social and the spiritual, are constantly inscribed in the plot: in Oriel Lamb's performance of neighbourly love through good works in a bad, perhaps manifestly evil world; the coming together of the two families through the marriage of Rose and Quick, and the birth of their child Harry; the final removal of the fence between the two backyards; and Quick's recognition during his vision in the wheat field that he is, after all, his brother's keeper. The novel's twin themes of social consensus and spiritual transcendence are strongly supported by Winton's public references to his Christian, family-centred values.

Another common feature of the Great Australian Novel is that it has tended to be an historical saga. I'm thinking, for example of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (1955), which has many similarities to *Cloudstreet*. The status of historical fiction was greatly enhanced by the Bicentenary and its popular historicism. Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) and his Booker Prize-winning *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) are both sweeping historical sagas that operate simultaneously at the regional, national and international levels. Although it was not published until 1991, I would regard *Cloudstreet* as Winton's Bicentennial book.

Andrew Taylor asked Winton about the historical and nostalgic aspects of the novel in a 1996 interview. Taylor asked:

> *Cloudstreet…it's the childhood of your parent's generation, isn't it? Why did you choose to write about that generation in particular?*

Winton replied:

> *I remember walking around in the streets of the City of Perth and being appalled. What I hadn't realized before was how much of the city had been destroyed in the orgies of development in the 1960s and 1980s. The places I grew up with…had simply become mythic because the bulldozers had got to them and those shiny reflective shit boxes had been put up in their place…I was re-imagining it…the city of your parents, the city of your grandparents…*
>
> *It sent me off…thinking about the destruction of community, the destruction of neighborhoods…the loss of the corner shop, all the kinds of things that people get nostalgic about for good reason…Plus I was documenting all the verbal history and the nonsense and the tall stories I'd grown up with…listening to all these people talking in accents and inflections that had become pressed out of reality, out of existence by the Americanisation of our culture.*[20]

Winton is quite explicit, then, about the novel's nostalgia for lost places, for an Australian accent and culture that are pre-American, pre-modern, pre-1960s. These qualities find expression in the novel's rich registration of Australian idioms of the 1940s and 1950s, and its superbly lyrical descriptions of places and landscapes in and around Perth. 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.

Stylistically, too, *Cloudstreet* can at once be read back into the Australian tradition and forward into certain forms of internationalism. I've already mentioned a number of Great Australian Novels whose saga form is echoed in *Cloudstreet*, such as Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*. But it was another aspect of the novel's style that allowed it to seem fashionable and even international in the 1990s — that is, its affinities with magic realism. This is most often associated with the Latin American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1971) combined elements of the national historical saga with eruptions of myth and magic into the plot as if they were "real." Winton flirts with magic realism in a few notable episodes, such as the fishing episode at Margaret River, where Quick sees the Aboriginal angel and his boat magically fills with fish. This Bruegel-like domestication of one of the miracles in the New Testament is an example of Winton's quest to locate the extraordinary in the real, to show, literally, that ordinary life overflows with divine grace.

The other important magic realist device is the haunting of the house by two dead women: the old lady who turned her home into a charitable institution for Aboriginal girls, and the Aboriginal girl taken from her family who committed suicide in the house. This is almost certainly derived from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which is set in a house haunted by the ghost of a negro baby killed by its own mother to save it from a life of slavery prior to the American Civil War. Eventually the houses in both novels are exorcised by the establishment of a positive community, and especially through the nurturing efforts of women. Angels and spirits were in fashion in the 1990s, appearing in a number of other Australian novels, short stories and films, including Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992). Winton, though, risks the charge that he is appropriating Aboriginal and African-American trauma as a way of expressing the dilemmas of poor white Australians.

One other element of *Cloudstreet* that has contributed to its popular readability is its rich and much-publicised interaction with Winton's own biography, which he discusses in almost every interview he gives. Like Oriel Lamb, his grandmother lived in a tent; one of his grandfathers was a vaudeville performer like Lester, who kept mannequins in his shed; his father was a policeman in Perth during the 1960s like Quick Lamb; and he used to listen to his father telling stories to his mother. Quick and Rose's son Harry is born around the time of Winton's own birth in 1960. These biographical inscriptions indicate how a text can interact with the public life of its author's identity, which Winton actively promotes.

In its style and themes, then, *Cloudstreet* operates simultaneously at a number of levels. Its greatest achievement, I think, is the way it orchestrates them:

- it locates the national in the regional; or elevates the regional to national significance
- it richly recreates the colloquial speech and places of an era that is now felt to be lost, and for which Australian readers of a certain generation feel a great nostalgia
- it locates the spiritual in the physical and the everyday
- it performs an appropriate affective response at each of these levels: a sentimental commitment to region and to nation; a nostalgic interest in history and tradition; a "celebration" of grace, community and atonement in ordinary life.

The negative side of these strengths is that they make Winton seem like an anti-modern, anti-metropolitan, even anti-intellectual writer. This makes Winton a novelist quite unlike his contemporaries, such as Helen Garner and Peter Carey, who are distinctly modern, cosmopolitan writers. He is also distinct from the younger "grunge" writers who came after him in the mid-1990s, beginning with Andrew McGahan's *Praise* in 1992. Winton's persona and values are more akin to those of the poet Les Murray, who also champions the traditions of the rural battlers above the metropolitan and the modern. There are, then, both positive

and negative reasons why, in the 1990s, the field of Australian literature, in its broadest sense, established *Cloudstreet* as a Great Australian Novel. Or, to put this another way, Tim Winton and *Cloudstreet* have done all that the field of Australian literature, in all its diversity, expects them to do. It was the ideal Bicentennial novel, championing traditional Australian values and social consensus, and appealing to the varied historical, literary and even spiritual interests of mainstream, middlebrow, middleclass Australian readers.

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979. London: Routledge, 1986); *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (London: Polity, 1993).

2 David Carter, "Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and the Nation." *Australian Literary Studies* 19.2 (October 1999): 136–51.

3 Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 1–5.

4 Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son" (1958), in *Patrick White: Selected Writings*, ed., Alan Lawson (St Lucia: UQP, 1994).

5 The following biographical information is derived from *Austlit*.

6 See, for example, Judith White, "Not the Great Australian Novel," *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 7 April 1991, 108.

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10 Cited in Anne Galligan, "Build the Author, Sell the Book: Marketing the Australian Author in the 1990s," in *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere*, eds., Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee (Toowoomba: ASAL, 1998): 152.

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