

Novel Politics: Studies in Australian Political Fiction, by John Uhr and Shaun Crowe. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2020. pp. xiv + 170, Paperback RRP \$34.99 ISBN: 9780522876420

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Australian political scientists have paid scant attention to literary fiction to inform their understanding of the nation's politics. In this book, which is based on an 'Ideas in Australian Politics' subject that they run at the Australian National University, John Uhr and Shaun Crowe present this blinkeredness as a missed opportunity. They challenge the traditional view that Australian fiction has had 'little time for politics' (p. 6) and argue instead that Australian novels often 'deal with politics as broadly understood' (p. viii). In the book's concluding chapter, they draw together four strong political themes in the novels that they survey: the natural environment; the 'peopling' of Australia; progressive social thinking; and nationalism and internationalism.

Uhr and Crowe do not attempt an overview of all the major Australian novelists or novels that might be considered 'political'. Instead, they focus on six writers drawn from two widely separated time periods—the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century. Uhr contributes chapters on Catherine Spence's *Clara Martin* (1854), Rosa Praed's *Policy and Passion* (1881) and Catherine Martin's *An Australian Girl* (1890), while Shaun Crowe discusses Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001), Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap* (2008) and Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) and *Taboo* (2017). These specific choices of novel seem *ad hoc* and are not really explained in the Preface or Introduction to the book. Nonetheless, there is a lot to be learned here about the politics of the particular novelists and novels under consideration. Each chapter provides information about the life and political concerns of the featured novelist, sets the primary novel in the context of the novelist's other works, summarises the novel's plot and provides commentary on its specific social, political and philosophical themes.

At several points, the authors stress that the focus of these novels is not on institutional politics—for example, 'the theatre of parliament'—but on 'politics in its deeper social

and human context' (p. x). Interestingly, the nineteenth century novelists presented in *Novel Politics* seem to make much stronger connections between these two facets of politics than their twenty-first century counterparts. In Spence's *Clara Martin*, characters participate in political debates over electoral and party competition and over public policy. Stella, the central character in *An Australian Girl*, engages in ongoing philosophical reflection and debate over Kant, Cardinal Newman and the potential of German socialism. She spends time in Germany, meeting socialist activists and attending a secret meeting featuring radical parliamentarians. Praed's *Policy and Passion* features the machinations of a Premier, rival Ministers and the Opposition in the colonial Queensland Parliament. (Uhr understandably discusses more detailed plot developments but I'll refrain from giving away spoilers here in case *APR* readers want to read the novels themselves.)

Nothing in the novels by Winton, Tsiolkas and Scott seems to approach this level of engagement with colonial/state or national institutional politics. They do not attempt to connect institutional politics with the social and cultural dimensions of politics in similar ways to Spence, Praed and Martin. The closest that the recent novels appear to come to these connections is passing references to protest and voting. This is not a criticism of the contemporary novels, which address critical political issues such as race, environment, violence, gender and sexuality in imaginative ways, but it does suggest some intriguing questions that are not addressed in *Novel Politics*. When and why did political novels in Australia apparently shift from serious concern with the institutional politics of Parliaments, executives, elections and parties to focus predominantly on broader social and cultural politics? Alternatively, is there an ongoing vein of Australian fiction that has continued to concern itself with political institutions and is still waiting for proper recognition and analysis? The ways in which Uhr and Crowe have shed new light on the contributions to political thought of largely forgotten nineteenth century Australian women novelists and their better known recent male counterparts suggests the value of future research into such questions.