

## **Australian Aboriginal SF – Blending Genre and Literary Fiction: A Review of *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* by Iva Polak**

### ABSTRACT

The fact that Iva Polak's monograph *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* is the first volume in Peter Lang's World Science Fiction Studies series, edited by Sonja Fritzsche, is symbolic of the actual novelty and relevance of Polak's work. It is, in fact, the first book-length study in English dedicated to the analysis of Australian Aboriginal fiction from the point of view of the theory of the fantastic.

Writing a study such as this entailed finding a solution to complex research problems that go beyond the intricacies of the literary text and theory. Namely, SF works by various non-Western authors have been so far largely classified into a very broad category of postcolonial science fiction, without looking into the very specific political, social and cultural situation that colours Australian Aboriginal fiction, creating thus a significant critical gap in the reception of these works. So, how does one write about Aboriginal SF when Australian literary critics deny the existence of such body of works, and how does one apply the theoretical frameworks developed by Western authors onto such a literary corpus? Polak's research has tried to provide answers to these questions in order to illuminate the largely unknown field of the native writers' science fiction and to elaborate on the "specific intra- and extra-literary matters" (Polak 2017, xii) that contributed to Aboriginal SF being largely neglected by literary critics.

The book consists of an introduction, conclusion and seven chapters, two of which delineate the theoretical frameworks and terminology, and the remaining five include literary analyses of works by Eric Willmot, Sam Watson, Archie Weller, Alexis Wright and Ellen van Neerven. In the introduction, the author deals with "the complexities accompanying Aboriginal fiction and science fiction" (Polak 2017, xi). These include Australia's propensity toward realist and documentarist fiction, and the accompanying invisibility of Aboriginal genre fiction when it comes to readership, scholarly reception (criticism) and the book market in general. In this part Polak also elaborates on why reading Aboriginal fiction from the point of view of SF may be problematic, both theoretically and culturally, given that the only available theoretical apparatus is Western, rather than Australian, let alone Aboriginal, since studies dealing with fantastic prose fiction written by indigenous and ethnic authors only began to appear in the twenty-first century.

Following this, the first chapter is dedicated to clarifying the terminology (the fantastic/fantasy/Fantasy/SF) and the chosen Western theoretical approach to the literary corpus of works by indigenous authors. In the words of the author herself, the study relies on a "theoretical bricolage of existing theoretical approaches to the fantastic, without attempting to indigenise theory" (Polak 2017, xii), which means that the inevitable theoretical backbone provided by Tzvetan

Todorov is expanded with the work of authors such as Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, Neil Cornwell, Christine Brooke-Rose, Eric S. Rabkin, W. R. Irwin, Rosemary Jackson, Irene Bessiere, and Kathryn Hume. In chapter two, the author provides the outline of the already existing theoretical field of postcolonial SF which arose from a logical connection between postcoloniality and SF written by authors inhabiting minority positions and dealing with topics of temporality, space and identity, which make up the centre of postcolonial studies. To anyone studying and reading such fiction the connection between colonial projects and the genre is clear, as SF makes heavy use of two *topoi* that have to do with colonialisation and contact with the unknown. First of all, there is usually a faraway destination (planet) waiting to be colonised, and there is also the figure of a stranger, an alien, (an Other) who represents a threat to the status quo. The complexity of the narrative arises from the inherent ambiguity of both *topoi*. The fluid status of the two concepts – a new territory and a stranger – depends heavily on the perspective of the colonial/postcolonial narrator and the reader who identifies the Other; that is, decodes others as strangers and perceives someone's land as no man's. Australia itself is a case in point, as it was declared *terra nullius* by the English colonisers when, in fact, it was peopled by hundreds of thousands of Aboriginals – people native to the continent.

Following the discussion on postcoloniality and SF, there are several chapters dedicated to a comprehensive analysis of six literary texts written by Aboriginal writers, whereby Polak's study can be said to be establishing some form of Aboriginal SF canon. For each of those texts, Polak provides an adequate socio-historical context, an overview of the text's reception, and an analysis of textual features within the framework of the fantastic as a meta-principle, which is followed by the definition of the text's genre. Most of the texts turn out to be hybrid, a blend of fantastic genres such as fairy tale, magic realism, science fiction, Gothic and others. In chapter three she tackles Eric Willmot's *Below the Line* (1991), which explores the possibility of an Asian invasion and is identified as the first Aboriginal SF novel. The following chapter deals with Ellen van Neerven's novella "Water" (2014) in which she depicts plantpeople, an Other in the form of a non-human novum, and chapter five tackles Archie Weller's novel *Land of the Golden Clouds* (1998), a work situated in the very distant future and drawing extensively on the Biblical motif of the Second Coming and possible restoration after an apocalypse. Chapter six deals with Sam Watson's novel *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990), a complex "slipstream" narrative that provides models of cultural experience of reality as it explores Aboriginal Dreaming and illustrates the fluidity of knowing and being in the postmodern existence. The final text considered is Alexis Wright's epic *The Swan Book* (2013), which leads the book to its conclusion. In this, Polak argues that Aboriginal SF represents a turning point not only in the development of Aboriginal fiction, but also for SF in general. The conclusion's general position of cautious optimism arises from the fact that the authors construct future postcolonial worlds which testify to the possibility of surviving colonialism. Whatever it may be, the future does arrive and, although it may be slight, the promise of new life even after some form of disaster or doom is seen as a sort of comfort.

In the context of global contemporary research marked by interest in the issues of trauma, memory and identity, Iva Polak's study represents a relevant contribution to literary studies in general, and SF studies in particular, as it analyses fictional constructions of future worlds narrated from the point of view of the Aboriginal writers' own cultural memory. Moreover, Polak's book tackles both the early reception of the chosen prose texts and their generic features (form and content) which assign these texts to the genre of science-fiction. The misconceptions that gave rise to the traditional and, by now, out-dated qualification of science-fiction as trivial are clearly revealed when confronted with texts that deal with Aboriginal cultural trauma; in fact,

the construction of future worlds establishes itself as the mode through which trauma attempts to be resolved. As such, SF occupies the position of literary fiction, rather than just genre fiction, as the works analysed serve to evoke empathy and identification on the one hand, and critical thinking on the other, rather than to serve as mere escape from the everyday and humdrum.

Lastly, and quite importantly, in her analysis Polak is very cautious when it comes to the tricky, politically significant fact of her position as a non-Aboriginal literary critic. She is well-aware of the fact that she does not share the cultural experience of the authors and navigates her use of Western theoretical models tactfully, especially in light of the awareness of historical issues of censorship and disciplining of indigenous cultural productions. Consequently, she is explicit about her care not to resort to cultural appropriation or misinterpretation, inviting new and other interpretations by other critics in potential future studies. Having all this in mind, it is safe to say that *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* is a very rewarding read for all SF scholars, as it opens up new and different venues of research and elucidates an as-yet-unknown corpus to potential researchers and readers.

## References

Polak, Iva. 2017. *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*. Oxford: Peter Lang.