

Judges' Report for the 2022 AUHE Prize for Literary Scholarship

The winner of the 2022 AUHE Prize for Literary Scholarship is Denise Varney for *Patrick White's Theatre: Australian Modernism on Stage, 1960-2018* (Sydney University Press, 2021)

In her meticulously researched, insightful and engaging book, Denise Varney treats Patrick White as a lightning rod for “the conflicts that run through and animate Australian life in the second half of the twentieth century.” This innovative approach enables Varney to show how changing responses to the content and form of White’s plays correspond to changing social and aesthetic attitudes in Australian society. Quickly dismissing the early assessment of him as a novelist who “merely dabbled in playwrighting,” Varney presents White instead as a genuine innovator in theatre. She argues convincingly that White’s theatre expresses a uniquely Australian brand of aesthetic modernism, one that challenges audiences with representations of gender fluidity, suburban spatiality, damaged minds, non-conformist and outsider characters. The secret to the book’s success is its elegant critical methodology of “plays plus staging.” *Patrick White's Theatre* offers not just sensitive close analysis of White’s eight plays and deft theorising about theatre, but also scrupulous historical reconstruction of the plays’ productions and reception. Drawing on archival research, Varney provides vivid descriptions of the staging of White’s plays over four decades. These thick descriptions in turn bring the changing times to life. Varney shows, for instance, how White’s early plays of the 1960s were badly received because they shunned the conventions of stage naturalism. But she also documents how audiences and critics in the 1970s began to appreciate White’s theatricalist and anti-realist tendencies. *Patrick White's Theatre* tells the engrossing story not just of the emergence of a truly Australian modernism on stage but also of a country coming to terms with its own modernity.

The judges also congratulate the authors whose works were shortlisted:

Roger Osborne, *The Life of Such Is Life: A Cultural History of an Australian Classic* (Sydney University Press, 2022)

In *The Life of Such Is Life: A Cultural History of an Australian Classic*, Roger Osborne offers a critical biography of the novel by Joseph Furphy that he describes as “a foundational text in Australian literary history.” Combining precise textual scholarship with cultural history, Osborne’s work describes both the tangled editorial provenance of Furphy’s novel and the author’s complex political investments. Deploying sophisticated methods of contemporary textual scholarship, this book analyses how *Such Is Life* relates to Furphy’s other fictional writings, as well as chronicling how the novel circulated in various editions after the author’s death. The thematic scope of Osborne’s book thus reaches more widely, to illuminate various complications around the academic development of Australian Literature as a professional field and how these manifested themselves both nationally and internationally. The extensive, meticulous and judicious nature of this scholarship makes a permanent contribution to Australian literary studies.

Meg Samuelson, *Claiming the City in South African Literature* (Routledge, 2021)

Meg Samuelson's slim, meticulously researched monograph, *Claiming the City in South African Literature*, makes an important contribution to studies of the Global South, South African literature and the urban. Joining other scholars who have queried the political and representational potency (even fetishisation) of 'the African farm,' Samuelson convincingly argues for the historical and contemporary importance of cities in the lives and literatures of South Africa. Samuelson's impressively comprehensive knowledge of South African literature and culture is demonstrated by her narrative sweep and depth. The 'claim' in the book's title serves as a guiding principle and provocation: the cities Samuelson addresses, from Johannesburg to Kimberley in the Northern Cape, are formed out of a cluster of competing 'claims' (economic, ethical) in the overlapping contexts of apartheid, extractive industries, the Anthropocene and community-building. Samuelson's text choice is inclusive, diverse and suggestive – the praise songs of migrant workers are juxtaposed with J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* to great effect – and her analysis is theoretically nuanced and sophisticated. This book is an exemplary instance of contemporary literary scholarship.

Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher, *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First Century Book Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2022)

In their original and punchy book, Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher explore the idea of genre worlds. The authors take an intermedial approach to their topic, offering "a systematic study of the multiple, interdependent moving parts of genre fiction." They argue convincingly that we can only get a complete picture of the work of popular fiction in the twenty-first century by examining how the industrial, social and textual dimensions of genre interact with one another. In this regard, *Genre Worlds* benefits greatly from the different expertise of its three authors in publishing and book history, literary studies and creative writing studies. Wilkins, Driscoll and Fletcher enrich our understanding and appreciation of popular fiction by showing how it circulates in the publishing industry and genre communities. Deftly combining theoretical analysis of the literary field with industry interviews, they model a holistic, ecumenical and experimental approach to literary study. Stressing that works of genre fiction are "a source of pleasure," *Genres Worlds* not only makes an important contribution to the study of popular fiction and twenty-first century book culture but is also a pleasure to read. One might say: a real page turner.

Judging Panel: Tanya Dalziell, Paul Giles and Chris Danta (chair)