Introduction

A NEW HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

Often engaging and well-written, [literary histories] are also in general derivative and conservative… New histories cannot but rely to a considerable extent on previous ones… It remains to be seen whether the possibilities offered by the web, and by electronic communications in general, will allow for a ‘flatter’, more horizontal and extensive, even more ‘democratic’ form of history production in the future.¹

In the popular imagination, archives remain dusty, hidden, forgotten places; in fact, they are increasingly likely to be digital and available online.² By changing the form that archives take, technology also transforms the ways in which they can be searched and the types of questions that can be asked of them. This shift affords opportunities for more extensive, data-rich and quantitative approaches to literary historical scholarship. But it does not negate – it actually increases – the potential for what we find in the archives to challenge and transform the way we understand the past. That, in a nutshell, is the premise and the aim of Reading by Numbers. By mining, modelling and analysing data in a digital archive – AustLit, a comprehensive, online bibliographical record of Australian literature³ – I present a new history of the Australian novel: one that concentrates on the nineteenth century and the decades since the end of the Second World War, and aims precisely for the more ‘extensive’ and ‘democratic’ historiography encouraged by the epigraph.

As these words imply, this is not a history of the great authors of Australian novels, nor of the canonical texts in this tradition. It is a history of the ‘routine configurations’ of this literary form,⁴ and of the ‘patterns, conjunctions, connections, and absences’⁵ in that history that only emerge in aggregate: when the Australian novel is approached as a field and a system rather than a collection of individual authors and texts. This approach is possible because Australia is leading the world in the scope and comprehensiveness of its digital bibliographical archive. Analysing the extensive data in AustLit has enabled me to ask questions about trends in the authorship of Australian novels as well as their form, place of publication, circulation and the reading communities they accessed. This exploration of trends both challenges established ideas about, and provides the basis for new understandings of, the history of the Australian novel.

Established arguments in Australian literary history that this book addresses and challenges include: that colonial authors were entirely – or even predominantly – reliant on British publishers; that men were the most successful authors of nineteenth-century Australian novels; that the 1970s and 1980s were a period of considerable growth in
the Australian novel field; and that contemporary Australian literature and publishing are currently in crisis due to the dominance of multinational conglomerates. In other cases, the historical trends suggested by analysis of the bibliographical data indicate new features of the Australian novel’s history. Among the many arguments in this book are new propositions regarding gender trends in the authorship of such titles; the circulation of Australian novels within Australia and beyond; and the readerships, in Australia and elsewhere, for this literary form.

Two main themes pervade this new literary history. The first is transnationalism. Despite the recent ‘transnational turn’ in humanities scholarship, most literary histories – and indeed, many book histories – still analyse literature in relation to a particular national space. Although the data I use in Reading by Numbers come from a national bibliographical archive, I explore the production, dissemination and reception of the Australian novel within and beyond the nation’s boundaries. For the nineteenth century I consider the relationship between the constructions of authorship, operations of publishing and formation of reading communities in Britain and the Australian colonies, as well as the movement of literature – in book and serial form – between these two places. In the contemporary period, I chart the history of the Australian novel in relation to a shift from a largely (though also generally unacknowledged) nation-based publishing industry to an explicitly globalised, or multinational, one. I demonstrate how the tension between nationalism and globalism shapes contemporary literary criticism, and explore the impact of transnational literary and political discourses on gender trends in the production and reception of Australian novels.

The second overarching theme in this book is the issue – and the question – of value. As I discuss in Chapter 1, quantitative analyses are frequently criticised for neglecting this aspect of the literary field. Because such analyses rarely, if ever, attend to what might be called the aesthetic features of particular literary works, they are seen as failing to appreciate – or, in stronger terms, as ignoring and desecrating – literary value. This book does not deny that such value exists; rather, my point – and my concern – is that these constructions of value are too determining of literary history. Not only do particular (but loosely defined) value judgements about literature stand for many literary scholars as the only legitimate way of understanding that field, when translated into literary history, these decisions about what works are worthy of attention come to comprise the entirety of what we understand that history to be. The literary field contains multiple – changing, and often competing – ideas about the value of particular literary forms, and of the uses and meanings of literature. This book considers how the history of the Australian novel changes when forms not traditionally valued by literary critics are incorporated. There are many of these, but the main ones that emerge in this study are serialised fiction in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth, pulp fiction and popular genres more broadly. A history of the Australian novel that does not simply dismiss or deny the various regimes of value circulating in literary culture not only alters our understanding of that form and its development, but exposes and challenges assumptions – particularly regarding gender, class, geography and commerce – that lie beneath the value judgements made by Australian literary scholars and historians, and that shape large- as well as author-scale studies.

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I have emphasised how Reading by Numbers differs from previous studies; but it also builds on the cultural materialist approach that has characterised most histories of Australian literature since at least the late 1980s. One of the most influential early books to demonstrate this approach was Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman’s The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970–1988. Published in 1989, this study foregrounds the material contexts under which Australian literature was produced and consumed in that period. More recently, in 2000, Elizabeth Webby’s introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature describes the commitment of that collection, and of Australian literary studies generally, to a ‘culturally materialist perspective’, which she defines as a view of literary works not as aesthetic objects produced by gifted intellectuals but as cultural artefacts inevitably influenced and constrained by the social, political and economic circumstances of their times, as well as by geographical and environmental factors.

Alternatively, David Carter describes contemporary Australian literary studies in terms of ‘a kind of new empiricism’ – an approach developing ‘precisely through engagement with theories of culture that point beyond literary autonomy’. While empirical approaches to Australian literature in bibliography and scholarly editing have always considered this context, the emphasis on cultural materialism spread to the discipline more broadly through the influence of identity-based political and theoretical movements including Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism. These approaches motivated an interest in the position or construction of authors and texts, and to a lesser extent readers, in relation to historical and cultural discourses of class, gender, sexuality, race and geography. In the last decade or so, this focus on the contexts of production and consumption has taken a more specifically economic and material turn, with attention shifting to the ways in which literary works relate to and are incorporated within broader literary and commodity culture. Although related to the impact of cultural studies on the discipline, this shift is increasingly attributable to the rise of the history of the book, an interdisciplinary field that emphasises ‘print culture and the role of the book as material object within that culture’ (the book, here, is taken to mean ‘script and print in any medium, including books, newspapers, periodicals, manuscripts and ephemera’). Indeed, much contemporary research into the history of Australian literature – especially in respect to the nineteenth century, but increasingly in relation to the twentieth – occurs at the boundaries of literary and book history.

It is at these boundaries that quantitative methods are playing a growing and prominent role in Australian literary studies. Recent quantitative work in this field, some of which I discuss in detail in this book, explores Australian literature in relation to publishing, sales, reviewing and readerships. Of course, simply because they are increasingly common does not mean such approaches are accepted by everyone. Susan Lever, for instance, associates the rise of book history, ‘distant reading’, and ‘quantifying skills’ with the decline of evaluative criticism, which she claims must remain ‘the main game for a literary academic’ and the focus of Australian literary studies. However, I see this incorporation of quantitative approaches not as a dramatic departure from, but as a logical next step in, the cultural materialist approach.
A central feature of cultural materialist studies has been a move beyond the canonical perspective of earlier histories of Australian literature, to a broader conception of the literary field. This widening perspective is foregrounded in the title of *The New Diversity*, which discusses a much greater range of authors and books than was the case in earlier histories. Eleven years later, Delys Bird’s chapter on contemporary fiction in *The Cambridge Companion* referred to 107 authors. Although not even approaching the more than 2,500 Australian authors who published novels in the years she surveys (from 1970 to 1999), this figure demonstrates the shift in Australian literary studies to trying to survey the range of what was written, published and read, rather than a selective canon of great works.

Quantitative research into Australian literature enables this ongoing attempt to perceive and represent literary culture in as broad and comprehensive a way as possible. Rather than detracting from evaluative criticism, my work on trends in the production and reception of Australian literature has the potential to alleviate some of the pressure for coverage by providing a context in which to discuss individual works, including those of the canon. It could, in other words, allow literary scholars to concentrate more effectively on providing detailed and nuanced readings of particular literary works, without having to abandon a sense of those works as ‘cultural artefacts’, embedded in a social, political, economic and material world.

At the same time, quantitative methods – and the computational strategies that enable them – should not be accepted uncritically. Their incorporation into literary studies raises a range of theoretical, methodological and epistemological issues that need to be considered if such approaches are to make a valuable and ongoing contribution to humanities scholarship. Considering these issues is the focus of my first chapter, ‘Literary Studies in the Digital Age’. This chapter outlines the main criticisms that have been made of quantitative approaches to literary history: that they ignore the complexity of literary texts and privilege a simplistic understanding of literary culture; make false claims to absolute knowledge; and resonate, in problematic and complicit ways, with dominant institutional and political discourses. While acknowledging the importance of these criticisms, I show that these characteristics are not intrinsic to the quantitative method.

Drawing on methodological discussions in book history and the digital humanities, I outline a critical approach to working with data and computers in literary history, and the humanities more broadly. This approach is one that maintains a view of the importance of empirical data and the historical understandings they can enable, while conceptualising the creation, presentation and interpretation of data as a form of representation and argument, rather than an expression of objective truth. Such an understanding enables a productive integration of – rather than a hostile stand off between – empirical analysis and humanities inquiry.

The remaining four chapters deploy the theoretical and methodological framework outlined in Chapter 1 to explore the history of the Australian novel. These chapters are divided in two ways: by period and focus. In respect to period, Chapters 2 and 4 consider the nineteenth century, and Chapters 3 and 5 investigate the decades since the end of the Second World War. One chapter for each of these periods focuses on trends in publishing (Chapters 2 and 3), the other on gender trends in authorship (Chapters 4 and 5). My concern throughout is to explore how trends in the authorship, publication, distribution
and reception of Australian novels challenge received wisdom about, and add to our understanding of, the history of that form.

Recent histories of publishing and reading in Australia during the nineteenth century emphasise the dominance of British publishers and books for colonial authors and readers, in a framework that presents local publishers and authors as largely marginal to colonial literary culture. Chapter 2, ‘Beyond the Book: Publishing in the Nineteenth Century’, argues that Australian publishers – especially of periodicals – and local readers were of foundational importance to the history of the Australian novel. Although British book publishers played a major role in the colonial market, in the first half of the nineteenth century local publishers provided essentially the only avenues of publication for authors who remained in the colonies. In the second half of the century, until the 1890s, more Australian novels were first published in the colonies than were first published in Britain. The local readerships for Australian novels indicated by these publishing trends – and other data on circulation and pricing – suggest alternative modes of reading existed alongside the ‘Anglocentric reading model’ that currently dominates understandings of colonial literary culture. These local readerships also provide a reason why, when seeking access to the lucrative colonial book market in the 1890s, British presses substantially increased their publication of Australian novels. The findings outlined in this chapter show that relationships between British publishers and colonial authors and readers were more interactive than the top-down exercise of power implied by histories emphasising the dominance of the imperial centre.

Chapter 3, ‘Nostalgia and the Novel: Looking Back, Looking Forward’, also analyses publication data, but for Australian novels since the end of the Second World War. I use this data to complicate the widespread conception of the 1970s and 1980s as a ‘golden age’ for Australian literature and publishing. While this understanding – and the cultural or literary nationalist paradigm that underpins it – organises contemporary Australian literary history, including recent book histories, the periodisation it institutes bears little resemblance to the production and circulation of Australian novels in these decades. In particular, this nostalgic nationalist framework conceals the importance of the local publishing industry to Australian authors and readers immediately following the war, and can only perceive recent trends in publishing negatively. I highlight the continuities in publishing trends before, during and after this purported ‘golden age’, while also exploring the growth and implications of self- and subsidy-funded publishing in the 1990s and 2000s. The periodisation, industry dynamics, and relationships between authorship, publishing and reading presented in this chapter are significantly more complex, but also more interesting and challenging, than existing histories of contemporary Australian literature and publishing allow.

Chapters 4 and 5 also focus, respectively, on the nineteenth century and the decades since the end of the Second World War. In exploring gender trends in the authorship of Australian novels they add another layer to the revised history already presented. Chapter 4, ‘Recovering Gender: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century’, shows that the three major forms in which colonial novels were published – local serialisation, and British and Australian book publication – manifested distinct gender trends in authorship. Women’s novels were more likely to be serialised than men’s, while men’s novels were more likely
to be published as books. At the same time, and despite the fact that men outnumbered women as authors of nineteenth-century Australian novels, more titles by women were published as books in Britain. Women authors, in other words, were overrepresented in the two areas of publication for colonial novels – as serials and as British books – that offered the greatest economic and/or cultural rewards. I argue that competing gendered constructions of the novel and authorship in Britain and the colonies profoundly shaped the transnational circulation of nineteenth-century Australian novels and that, in the cultural terms of the day, women novelists – although outnumbered by their male counterparts – were more successful. At least, this was the case until the 1890s, when book publication in Britain became common for colonial male novelists. As well as offering a new perspective on Australian literary culture in this decade, gender trends in the 1890s suggest another way in which British publishers responded to local practices and preferences to gain entry to the colonial book market.

Chapter 5, ‘The “Rise” of the Woman Novelist: Popular and Literary Trends’, explores gender trends in the publication of Australian novels since the end of the Second World War. The empirical data strongly support the claim by feminist critics that, around 1970, Australian literature shifted from a predominantly male-oriented field to one where women played an increasingly prominent and important role. However, I also show that this gendered shift, while occurring in the literary and critical spheres that are the predominant focus of feminist analyses, was most pronounced in genre fiction publishing. The parallels between gender trends in popular and literary spheres emphasise the importance of gender-alert analyses for understanding Australian literary history. But they challenge the meanings that feminist literary critics have attached to this shift, specifically, the interpretation of growth in Australian women’s writing in the 1970s and 1980s as an indication of women’s political and social emancipation. I argue that political changes were influential, but that this shift was also – and primarily – a commercial trend, driven by new awareness of a female market for fiction, popular and literary. Challenging the established association of women’s writing and women’s liberation is especially important for understanding gender trends in the 1990s and 2000s. Although it has not been acknowledged, women now dominate the Australian novel field. Far from being a sign of women’s liberation, I argue that this gender trend in authorship has produced both a devaluing of this literary form, and a re-establishment of male novelists at the centre of critical discussion and acclaim. As I demonstrate through these case studies, quantitative analysis and computational methods have significant potential to offer new perspectives on existing debates in literary studies, as well as new ways of conceptualising the field, and new research questions and directions for literary scholarship in the future.