

Australian Literature: Kevin Donnelly
“A Canon We Can’t Afford to Overlook”, *The Australian*, 9 August 2007

Donnelly makes the paradoxical claim that Australian literature is being both neglected and abused in the nation’s classrooms. He argues, without providing any support, that Australian teachers of English are neglecting the “moral and aesthetic value of great works” by primarily analysing literature in terms of “power relationships and the rights of victim groups.”

The Facts

English teachers in Australian schools have a deep and abiding commitment to Australian literature and the cultural heritage of this nation. The range of Australian titles made available to teachers and students on reading lists around the country is extensive.

In NSW 46 of the 125 texts prescribed for the HSC are written and produced by Australians. Students have the opportunity to study acknowledged classic and contemporary works. Prescribed authors include Henry Lawson, A.B. Patterson, Patrick White, Tim Winton, Peter Carey, Kenneth Slessor, Robert Dessaix, Gwen Harwood, Rosemary Dobson, Judith Wright, Tara June Winch and Drusilla Modjeska.

The Victorian reading lists include, amongst many others, works by Kate Grenville, Bruce Dawe, Beverly Farmer, Nick Enright, Robert Drewe, Les Murray, Raimond Gaita, Gillian Mears and Judith Beveridge.

Recommended to teachers and students in other states are many of the same names as in NSW and Victoria, and also esteemed authors such as Thea Astley, Murray Bail, Elizabeth Jolley, Carmel Bird, Richard Flanagan, Jean Bedford, Sonya Hartnett and Peter Goldsworthy.

English teachers continue to advance the cause of Australian literature. Most recently, the state conference of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English featured appearances by Kate Grenville, William McInnes, Martin Flanagan, Peter Temple, Vincent Trundle, Michael McGirr, Alice Pung, Larissa Behrendt, Gregory Day and Dorothy Porter (all recommended authors for study in that state). Alexis Wright, winner of the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, was a star attraction at this year’s AATE national conference in Canberra. National Reading Day is a new national event for pre-school to Year 10 students. It highlights books by five Australian authors for children and adolescents, and will be conducted on the 5th of September by AATE and the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association as part of National Literacy and Numeracy Week.

Donnelly’s manic pursuit of the ‘culture wars’ means he refuses to acknowledge the central place of Australian literature in English and English teaching in this country. Moreover, his vision of an Australian canon is culturally impoverished and limiting.

Donnelly’s disparagement of “victims groups” (which reads as code for women, migrants and Aboriginals) amounts to a denial of modern Australia and a retrograde

yearning for a non-existent homogeneous past. The list of authors he suggests should be studied in schools includes two women, just one writer who is from a non-Anglo Celtic background and no Aboriginal writers. Further, just one of Donnelly's favoured authors can be described as being 'contemporary'. Donnelly's is a very narrow definition of the "Australian imagination" and the Australian cultural heritage. It does not give our very diverse student population full scope to consider what it means to be an Australian in the twenty-first century. For this reason it is particularly unAustralian.