IMPRESSIONS OF A WORKSHOP

organised by Dr Anna-Sophie Jürgens in cooperation with Dr Rebecca Hendershott (Australian National University) | held at the National Museum of Australia on 12 October 2018 | supported by Inspiring the ACT (glassblowing performance) | special guests: Peter Goldsworthy AM and A/Prof Elizabeth Leane (UTAS)

What makes a scientist in Australian fiction?
How are fictional Australian scientists depicted in the relationship to the land?
What aesthetic narrative techniques does literature use to represent, (re)configure and stage these?
Why do scientists in fiction matter?

These were the pivotal questions of a workshop held on 12 October 2018 at the National Museum of Australia under the auspices of the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) of the Australian National University (ANU). The workshop was a special event within the interdisciplinary series ‘Conversations Across the Creek’ which is an initiative by the HRC and the ANU Research School of Chemistry to provide a space for ongoing dialogue among scientists, social scientists and humanities scholars.

As a follow-up event of the HRC’s 2018 Frankenstein conference – celebrating ‘Two Hundred Years of Monsters’ – the workshop ‘Creators of Culture: Scientists in Australian Fiction’ subtly and allusively referred to the stories and motifs that have emerged from the Frankenstein mould since the nineteenth century. Although speakers touched upon insane scientist characters in fiction they also went beyond the crazy or mad stereotype (which has been prominently discussed by Tasmania based scholar Roslynn Haynes, for instance). They investigated adventurous science ambitions in icy landscapes (similar to those known from the Frankenstein novel) and explored astonishing and dubious experiments performed by the contemporary fictional Homo sapiens scientificus – as he is called in Honk if you are Jesus, a 1992 novel by Australian author and poet Peter Goldsworthy (who was a speaker at the workshop and the focus of a round table discussion). A glassblowing performance (generously supported by Inspiring the ACT) gave insights into the fantastic art of scientifically extracting the essence of clouds and invited the audience to actively participate under the guidance of a professional glass artist. Two presentations by young ANU scientists finally illuminated the future of science performances and experimentation in fiction – specifically science fiction.

Rather than focusing on the monsters inherent in, or traditionally associated with, the Frankenstein saga, the workshop thus explored daring, bold and highly creative fictional scientist characters – and whether, how and to what extent they can be called creators of Australian culture. By examining scientists in fiction, the workshop reassessed and confronted conceptions of science in the Australian context that claim that Australia is a receiver of knowledge, rather than a creator of culture.
From my perspective, it was really heartening to see an event that brought together academics from such a wide range of discipline – linguistics to astrophysics! – as well as interested members of the public. I found the presentations and discussions fascinating and was delighted to be able to take part.

Elizabeth Leane (UTAS)

The workshop promoted the idea that literature holds a place in the centre of intellectual debate in ‘an age of science and technology’, and explored what the ‘poetics of science’ might be in Australian literature. An array of possible societal and cultural benefits of both the study of scientists in fiction and the creative interplay of science and fiction emerged from the discussion.

If asked what the powers of scientists in fiction set in, or revolving around, Antarctica are, literary scholar Elizabeth Leane had a clear answer: the figure of the scientist shapes our understanding of a whole continent and crucially affects our understanding of geographical belonging. The conventions of the thriller narrative and the stereotype of the action hero, she argued, influence the way we write and think about Antarctica, and influence our vision of the future of the continent and its scientists. Working at the intersections of literature and science, humans and (hostile) nature, Leane also probed that and how literature influences what we feel about Antarctica, and emphasised how the discourse of (fictional) scientific quest and knowledge became part of the discourse of Australian identity.

A lovely crowd gathered in the Visions Theatre at the National Museum (left) and was welcomed by Professor Will Christie, Head of the ANU Humanities Research Centre (middle). Dr Anna-Sophie Jürgens introduced the speakers and expressed her thank-yous as the organiser (right). All photos by Konrad Lenz – www.konradlenz.net.
Peter Goldsworthy, medical practitioner and Australian writer, was a special guest in the afternoon of the workshop. He has published a plethora of well-known and highly awarded short stories, novels, poetry and opera libretti, and has not only been shortlisted for – but also won – many literary prizes across these genres – while also working as a doctor. In his lecture, which he commenced with poetic reflections on the chemistry of glass, he gave insights into the development of his own relationship to science and scientific creativity between precognition and recognition, his admiration for doctor-and-writer Anton Chekhov (his reflections on Dr Chekhov, ‘an equal-opportunity misanthrope’, can be found online, see below) and why science is both exciting and disturbing. In particular, Goldsworthy highlighted the humanising power of science – which was later discussed together with the other speakers. For this discussion that focused on Goldsworthy’s 1995 novel *Wish*, the group was joined by Catherine Travis, Professor of Modern European Languages from the ANU School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics.

Peter Goldsworthy’s novel *Wish*, which most originally reinterprets both the Frankenstein theme and the Pygmalion story (in the tradition of George Bernhard Shaw), perfectly captures the issue of ethics and welfare for languagised apes and the rich metaphors in Australian Sign Language, accompanied by images presenting them.
On Goldsworthy’s book *Wish*, one review noted that the story “takes you to the outer limits of language, nature, ethics and love” – four appropriate themes for a discussion of scientists (and science) in fiction, and the diversity of disciplines included on the day allowed us to address them from a range of perspectives.

Catherine Travis (ANU)

Following the round table discussion, in Dr Mark Eliott’s glassblowing demonstration participants of the workshop discovered an exceptional Australian scientist: Dr McFoggarty and his vitally important research into ‘Cloud Essence’, a mysterious and sublime substance purported since ancient times, to exist between the molecules in water vapour. The audience could not only witness but even participate in the blowing of a miniature glass cloud.

The last talks of the day – by Dr Sabrina Caldwell and Dr Brad Tucker from the ANU – explored portrayals of science in popular fiction and the uses of real-world science in science-fictive settings. Both speakers discussed that and how science fiction helps us to make sense of and even anticipate the ways in which our lives could change when underlying scientific conditions change, and that aspirational portrayals of science in popular fiction have often been a source of inspiration to scientists to investigate said topics. When the science being explored reflects the real world, fictional scientists can become powerful real world culture creators, able to shape our responses to that science for good or ill.

From different perspectives, Caldwell and Tucker thus highlighted yet again that and why science (in fiction) is an important and fascinating cultural force.
For further reading…


About the Humanities Research Centre http://hrc.cass.anu.edu.au/

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