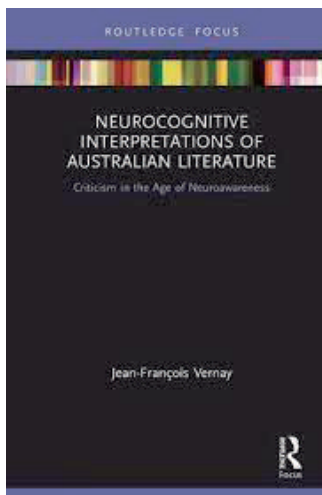


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Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness

*Jean-François Vernay, Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness, New York: Routledge, 2021, 158 pp., £ 15.19, ISBN 9781032078533*



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Jean-François Vernay's monograph *Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness* (2021) is the first book-length investigation of Australian literature through a cognitive lens. Drawing on a variety of cognitive concepts and theories, such as work on neurodiversity and moral emotions, the book highlights the possibilities that this relatively new and dynamic research field offers for Australian literary criticism. To this end, the book takes up a range of case studies, including best-sellers and literature from the margins alike, and discusses themes ranging from coming-of-age to literary fakes. The book is divided into four parts, each with a broad theme inspired by the theoretical framework: while Parts I and II ("Cognition and Literary Culture", "Cognition and the Mind") deal with the cognitive processes of writers and readers, Parts III and IV ("Cognition and the Body", "Cognition and Emotions") revolve around affect.

In the Introduction, Vernay presents important conceptual distinctions informing the book's analyses. Cognitive literary studies is defined as "a cluster of various literary criticism-related disciplines forming a broad-based trend that draws on the findings of cognitive science to sharpen their psychological understanding of literature by exploring the cognitive processes at work in the creative minds of writers and readers" (xiii.) While acknowledging the undeniable diversity of approaches within this interdisciplinary research field, the definition also leaves room for the book to incorporate a range of theoretical input without aligning with a particular corner of the "cluster." At the same time, the title of the book suggests a focus on neuroaesthetics, which is most prominently picked up in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. However, the introduction also makes an explicit point about steering clear of overt use of jargon, or "neurobabble," "to avoid turning literary reception into a scientific method" (xiv). Correspondingly, cognitive terminology is used in moderation throughout, and lengthy discussions of cognitive concepts are entirely absent from the book.

Continuing on from these distinctions, Chapter 1 gives examples of the kinds of literary phenomena that the cognitive approach is particularly suited to analysing, such as works that involve psychological complexity and speculative fiction capitalising on the untapped potential of the mind. The chapter then sketches out a succinct overview of cognitive Australian literary studies, singling out schema theory and affect theory as particularly prominent areas of inquiry. In describing the state-of-the-art, which should be very useful for any reader seeking an introduction to or synthesis of the field in Australia, Vernay emphasises the many opportunities the cognitive approach affords and argues that it offers welcome theoretical and methodological invigoration for Australian literary studies. However, Vernay writes that the field has met with resistance and outlines concerns that critics have raised. Among them is the difficulty of taking on board the specialist language of a scientific framework, which indeed makes truly interdisciplinary cognitive literary research a particularly demanding undertaking.

The first case study is Markus Zusak's popular novel *The Book Thief* (2005). The discussion focuses on the appeal of books as physical objects through the protagonist Liesel Meminger. With theoretical grounding in the neurocognitive processes of sensory pleasure and human-object relations, Vernay demonstrates how Liesel's material engagement with books becomes a consuming attachment, even at the face of danger. The analysis additionally considers the physical dimensions of *The Book Thief* itself in embodying its theme through enticing cover art. This is very much in line with cognitive literary approaches to reading as they emphasise that cognition is embodied (as well as enacted, embedded and extended, abbreviated as 4E) – engaging with literature is always a situated process. While the 4E view of cognition is not discussed in detail, on the whole the chapter offers a convincing cognitively informed take on the role that the materiality of books plays in the aesthetic experience. The attention given to the non-professional reader (in the form of Liesel Meminger) is especially inspiring. This is an often-neglected aspect particularly in cognitive poetics, which tends to assume a specialist reader's expertise in connecting cognitive effects with aesthetic features.

Chapter 3 explores transformation and the tradition of *Bildungsroman* in C. J. Koch's works. The historical contextualization of *Bildung* forms an interesting point of comparison

to the cognitively oriented discussion of the transformative potential of coming-of-age fiction. Although literary reception has been subject to plenty of empirical research, long-term mental change prompted by fiction is notably difficult to study. In the case of Koch the conclusion is that the novels analysed certainly gaze inward as regards formation, but also reach outward to the reader for example by building on resonant conceptual metaphors. Vernay cautions against being overly speculative about this outward reach having lasting effects on the reader, but also points to the prospect that this may be something cognitive literary study will have more to say about in the future.

Taking a different perspective on social cognition, Chapter 4 delves into the depiction of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Graeme Simsion's *Rosie* trilogy. The trilogy is compared with Mark Haddon's best-selling *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) since both portray "scientific minds who do not see themselves as high-functioning autistic" (49) and are written by neurotypical authors. Furthermore, the discussion parallels growing awareness about neurodivergence with the emergence of (high-functioning) ASD fiction as a genre, illustrating its salient traits with examples from the *Rosie* trilogy. In addition to the combination of a neurotypical author and a neurodivergent protagonist, these include "the difficulty for the neurodivergent character to achieve social inclusion", "a brain-conscious narrative whose protagonist is essentially perceived as a cerebral organism" and "an ambiguous blend of autistic and scientific cultures" (50). While Vernay critically examines Simsion's advocacy and acknowledges the potential issue of the books romanticizing the reality of living with ASD in a world that caters to neurotypicality, a further challenge with adopting a cognitive perspective on such texts is that neuroscientific knowledge on ASD is ever-evolving, as evidenced in the fairly recently proposed inaccuracy of the term "mind-blindness" (50)<sup>1</sup>. In other words, when literary works are "informed by neuroscientific culture" (51), there may be lag in culture absorbing new scientific input – something that the chapter could have addressed more prominently.

In Part III, the book adopts a bodily perspective to two very different types of texts: explicitly erotic literature and indigenous depictions of colonial trauma. In Chapter 5, Australian (underground) erotic literature is viewed mainly through a literary historical lens, with psychoanalytical and neurophysiological insights additionally informing the exploration of responding to such texts. The cognitive component here is how literary cues grab the reader's attention to trigger arousal, however the specific trigger mechanism is not explored in detail in the chapter. Chapter 6, on the other hand, develops a detailed analytical take on bodily response to trauma. Vernay shows how Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2017) depict trauma through "mental scars [...] and physical damage" (89). As such, they bypass the traditional Western body / mind dualism, a move that is also at the core of current cognitive approaches. Though the cognitive lens is quite implicit in this chapter as well, the finding that in these books "the physical bodies of characters become a reading map for their psycho-emotional states" (90) nevertheless resonates deeply with recent Enactivist discussions of cognition.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eliane Deschrijver & Colin Palmer. 2020. Reframing Social Cognition: Relational Versus Representational Mentalizing. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146: 11: 941–969.

The final part of the book focuses on affect, first zooming in on the portrayal of anger in gay fiction (Chapter 7) and then tackling moral emotions in the reactions to a famous literary fraud, the case of Helen Demidenko and *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994) (Chapter 8). Chapter 7 considers violence as a literary trope in relation to the neurophysiological mechanisms giving rise to rage, while Chapter 8 investigates a somewhat different negative affect, the complex ways in which moral judgment ties into anger and disgust. In both cases, the neurophysiological dimension is closely connected with social triggers and the cognitive consequences of expressing emotions. With the literary texts analysed in Chapter 7, the release of anger caused by social injustice is shown to produce a cognitive reward in the character, and interpreting these releases in context also makes them more socially acceptable for the reader. As for the non-unanimous moral outrage following the uncovering of Demidenko's disingenuous appropriation of real-life events in her fictive novel, Vernay asks whether it is so that "a cluster of emotions" inevitably turns into "a situation where one emotion would have the capacity to overpower all others" (121). The analysis suggests that when a literary response includes identifying with a social group that has been wronged, moral judgment is likely to align with the group, which may quite possibly lead to shunning literary and emotive complexity.

Overall, Vernay's book offers an engaging application of cognitive approaches to Australian narrative fiction. It is especially valuable for a reader interested in acquainting themselves with Australian writers who explore emotions and psychological themes and for a reader interested in the study of these themes in Australian fiction. The choice to weave relevant theory into the case studies, rather than to offer a separate literature review, allows the close readings to take centre stage and avoids burdening non-specialist readers with an abundance of terminology. On the other hand, the diversity of the cognitive approaches in use and debates around key cognitive concepts are backgrounded with this choice, and readers unfamiliar with the basic tenets of 4E cognition, conceptual metaphors or mind style will need to look further to form a deeper understanding. Doing so will likely also make it clearer what is at stake in the objections to cognitive literary study outlined in Chapter 1.

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