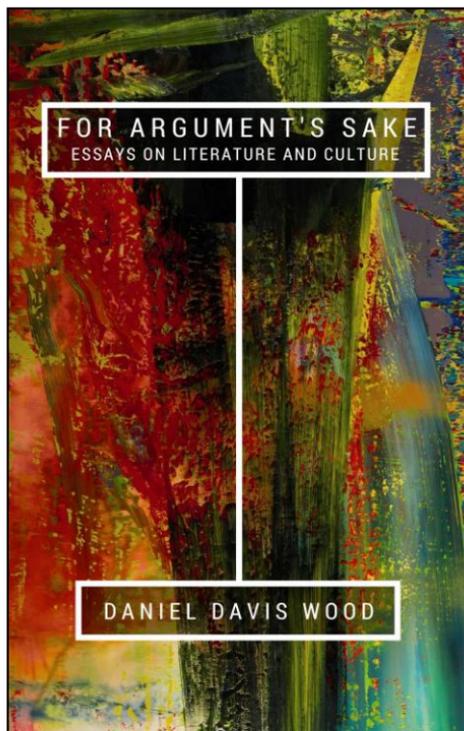


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 395-400.

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A GAZE INTO THE ABYSS

THE READER EDITED BY DION KAGAN

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OVER THE LAST DECADE OR SO, ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST literary success stories has been the phenomenal growth of Melbourne's Emerging Writers' Festival. Originally only a one-day zine fair, the Festival expanded into a weekend event in 2003 and a week-long event in 2009. Now accompanying the Festival is *The Reader*, a collection of interviews and articles by the writers who participated in last year's event, with as-yet-undiscovered names jostling for space alongside the likes of Steven Amsterdam, Lally Katz, and Christos Tsiolkas. It's a great idea on paper, so to speak, offering the general reader both a peek under the hood and a glimpse into the future as the nuts and bolts of writing are laid bare by Australia's up-and-coming *litterateurs*. Pry open the covers, however, and *The Reader* offers nothing so much as a gaze into the abyss, where, amidst all the explanations of how to write something in this genre or for that medium, altogether lacking is any self-awareness of why anyone might be compelled to write at all.

"The [Festival]," in the words of Dion Kagan, editor of this compilation, "is not so much about writers talking to their readers, but writers talking to other writers" (6). Which is fair enough, of course, or it would be if more of the writers in this volume had anything of value to say to anyone — readers and writers alike. The problem is not a lack of varied expertise. "Instead of just paying lip service to diversity," Kagan writes, "[*The Reader*] showcases the full gamut of work and workers" (6), and, true to his word, he gives voice to writers from a diversity of professions: novelists, screenwriters, playwrights, poets, and others. The problem, rather, is a homogeneity of literary sentiment. Dividing its content into seven sections — 'The Craft,' 'The Story,' 'The Process,' 'The Industry,' 'The Writer,' 'The Mentor,' and 'The Circuit' — the repetition of the definite article is a symptom of the disease that plagues *The Reader*. Despite the professional diversity of the forty writers showcased in this volume, there is little substantial difference between the written work of one and the work of the remainder. Not one of them seems to

have deeply questioned the value of the enterprise of writing, much less explored the avenues of writing that open up in the wake of such questioning.

Some of them, admittedly, come close to the mark. "I want to write," says Olivia Davis in her brief essay on the fear of writing. "I have created a window of time. I sit down and turn on the computer. I wait at least ten seconds for an idea to come" (55). But when nothing comes, her mind wanders, and she asks herself why she even bothers with writing. "I write," she concludes, "because I want to touch people's humanity by sharing my own" (55). Which is a response just weak enough to dodge the awkward question of whether or not writing is the best way to satisfy that want — and whether or not it is even capable of providing that satisfaction. Similarly, Steven Amsterdam relates his experience of questioning the enterprise of writing whilst working for a publishing company. "I'd look at the books," he says, "piled to the ceiling and waiting to be pulped, and think 'why bother?' ... casually asking [myself] if what I'm writing is important enough to justify the potential waste of paper" (67-68). But, again, the focus of the inquiry is misdirected. Amsterdam flinches at the last moment. The question is not how best to ensure that one's work does justice to the paper it is printed on. The question is how best to do justice to the subject of the work itself — which involves, first and foremost, asking oneself why the subject demands attention as a subject in the first place.

The truth is that writing is an obsessive-compulsive act. To write something with the utmost care and deliberation requires an extraordinary amount of time, and the willingness to spend that time writing requires both an obsession with one's chosen subject and a compulsion to return to it again and again over the course of months and years until every possibility it presents has been utterly exhausted. Bad writers, of course, dash off their work in a heartbeat before hungering after their next chosen subject, while competent writers frequently devote the requisite time to their work but take pains to conceal its obsessive-compulsive origins as if they are a source of embarrassment. Great writers, however, conceal nothing. They are obsessive-compulsive in their writing and they allow their

obsessive-compulsion to shine through every word that is written. They make their writing known as the product of an irritated conscience, but at the same time they question its ability to satisfy the irritation from which it has emerged; they at once insist on the necessity of their written words and yet recognise the inherent inability of those words to resolve the situation that made them necessary. The alternative to such writing is that of an altogether more self-satisfactory kind — writing that emerges from the overriding impulse to simply say something, anything at all, and to have one's voice be heard, rather than from both the conviction to say something that needs to be said and the knowledge that the saying of it is not adequate to finally ameliorate the need. That the latter sort of writing is what populates the pages of *The Reader* is, unfortunately, a given. The most significant problem with *The Reader*, though, is that too few of those who have produced this writing indicate that they are even aware of any other sort.

Certainly, their work is all reasonably well-written and entirely readable. All of them can all string a sentence together competently enough, and, from time to time, a paragraph shimmers with a nice turn of phrase. But the overriding assumption throughout the whole compilation is that merely being readable automatically makes a written work worth reading; that stylistic lyricism, above all else, will attract readers and will thereby imbue a written work with value; that a written work need only be well-crafted in order to justify its publication and, by extension, its appreciation by those who indulge in it. It is as if these writers have deemed themselves unable to write something objectively compelling, much less to write something of lasting value, and have decided instead to do nothing more ambitious than write something competent enough to be published. “[W]riters talking to other writers” (6) equates, it seems, to literary horse-trading, the exchange of trivial tips and tricks rather than the advancement of deeper inquiries into the nature of writing itself — writing as both an act and the product of that act. For the writers of *The Reader*, writing itself amounts to little beyond a lark, with serious consideration given more to the business of publishing than to the substance of what is to be published.

If the future of Australian literature rests in the hands of writers who treat it like this, we're in trouble. If writers talking to other writers only mutually reinforce their existing assumptions about what writing is, literary innovation of a particularly Australian variety will wither on the vine. Experimentalists in the vein of Brian Castro and Gerald Murnane will have a much harder time finding a place here than they do at present; and, without their relentless efforts to upend the entire enterprise of writing, the monolithic homogeneity of *The Reader* will be the mark of what lies in wait for us. We need writers who doubt their abilities as writers in order to dilute the business- and craft-oriented certitude that characterises those writers preoccupied with 'emerging.'

At this late stage, I should offer praise to those few writers in the compilation who serve as exceptions to the rule. In his article on book reviewing, Ryan Paine admirably confronts and catalogues his failures as a critic and assembles something of a manifesto for himself to honour in his future work. In her article on literary self-promotion, novelist Jennifer Mills takes a cold and unusually humble look at the emotional ambivalence she experienced following the publication of her first book. Angela Meyer carefully weighs books on literary craft against books on literary substance in her survey of useful resources for writers; and, in his interview with Koralý Dimiriadis, Christos Tsiolkas uncharacteristically offers emerging writers some valuable advice that I wish more writers in *The Reader* had taken before they set pen to paper:

Don't get into this if you're looking for celebrity, don't get into this if you're looking for status, don't get into this if you kind of like the idea of being a writer. Do this if writing is the one thing you must do in your life, and if that is the reason you are continuing to do it, then you will find a way of developing. (106)

With only sixty-seven words spoken in the spirit of Rilke, Tsiolkas far more drastically undercuts the work of the other writers in *The Reader* than I have done in several pages. In the hope that prospective writers of later years will heed his advice before they decide it's

the right time to emerge, I recommend reading *The Reader* for an understanding of the vacuity of those who spoke too soon without awaiting the compulsion to speak.

Works Cited

Kagan, Dion, ed. *The Reader*. Melbourne: Emerging Writers' Festival, 2009. Print.