

# Recognizing the Mallee

## Reading Groups and the Making of Literary Knowledge in Regional Australia

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Article abstract

Drawing on fieldwork in the Victorian Mallee region of Australia, this article explores the ways in which reading groups can elicit rich information about the relationship between literature, reading, and place. The study found that book group participants “recognized” the Mallee in the texts under discussion and engaged in their own forms of place knowledge and “history-telling” in response, making corrections to, and even rejecting, literary representations of their area. We argue that the resources for enhancing literary infrastructure exist, both in the broad history and diversity of Mallee writing, and in the social infrastructure of the Mallee. Readers’ knowledge, captured through book-related discussion in community spaces, offers the potential for enhancing existing literary resources in rural and remote regions.



## RECOGNIZING THE MALLEE: Reading Groups and the Making of Literary Knowledge in Regional Australia

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on fieldwork in the Victorian Mallee region of Australia, this article explores the ways in which reading groups can elicit rich information about the relationship between literature, reading, and place. The study found that book group participants “recognized” the Mallee in the texts under discussion and engaged in their own forms of place knowledge and “history-telling” in response, making corrections to, and even rejecting, literary representations of their area. We argue that the resources for enhancing literary infrastructure exist, both in the broad history and diversity of Mallee writing, and in the social infrastructure of the Mallee. Readers’ knowledge, captured through book-related discussion in community spaces, offers the potential for enhancing existing literary resources in rural and remote regions.

RÉSUMÉ

S’inspirant de recherches sur le terrain effectuées dans la région de Mallee de l’État de Victoria, en Australie, le présent article explore la manière dont les groupes de lecture foisonnent d’information quant aux liens qui unissent littérature, lecture et lieu. L’étude a en effet montré que les participants, « reconnaissant » la région de Mallee dans les œuvres proposées, s’appuyaient sur leur propre conception de la géographie et de la narration de l’histoire pour corriger, voire rejeter, les représentations littéraires de leur environnement. Nous soutenons qu’il existe des ressources aptes à valoriser l’infrastructure littéraire, tant dans l’histoire et la diversité des écrits émanant de la région de Mallee que dans son infrastructure sociale. Révélées par des discussions tenues dans des espaces communautaires, les connaissances des lecteurs sont susceptibles de mener à la mise en valeur de ressources littéraires déjà présentes dans des régions rurales et éloignées.

## Keywords

Australia, Regional Readers, Place, Literary History, Literary Infrastructure

## Mots-clés

Australie, lecteurs régionaux, lieu, histoire littéraire, infrastructure littéraire

This article reports on an ongoing literary history project which explores local reading in a regional context: the Mallee region of north-western Victoria, Australia. One of the purposes of our project is to explore the richness of Mallee literature and to capture the meanings local readers might derive from reading it “in place.” In these encounters, we have tried to find out how Mallee literary works are received by readers who are residents of this region, what understandings of the Mallee emerge from their discussions of the texts, and how cultures of creativity and sociability are enabled through textual engagement. Early findings indicate that the reading of Mallee literature can be affirming, allowing readers to “recognize” their place in fiction and also giving them an opportunity to disavow what they see as false or incorrect in these texts.

“The Mallee” is a semi-arid bioregion that extends beyond Victoria to include parts of New South Wales, Western South Australia, and Southern Western Australia. However, our focus is on the part of the Mallee which lies within the state boundaries of Victoria, the country’s southernmost mainland state, roughly 400 km from its capital, Melbourne. Approximately 40,000 square kilometres, the Mallee maps onto the traditional lands of many Indigenous language groups, including the Latji Latji, Paakantji (Barkindji), Ngiyampaa, Mutthi Mutthi, Wemba Wemba, Tati Tati and Barapa Barapa people who were widely dispossessed—and killed—by colonization, which began systematically in the 1830s.<sup>1</sup> The word “Mallee,” reportedly derived from the Wemba Wemba language,<sup>2</sup> is also the name of the area’s once-ubiquitous Mallee tree (*Eucalyptus dumosa* being the most common variety), which has been extensively uprooted to make way for dryland cropping. This economic base persists, and the Mallee is mostly known for its agricultural identity rather than its literary production. However, it is also a region in transition, struggling to deal with the socio-economic implications of the shift from small, family-run farms to large-scale industrialized agriculture during the second half of the twentieth

century. Combined with the implications of intensifying conditions of infrequent rainfall and rising temperatures, this transition has resulted in declining populations and caused significant social and economic stress in the area.

This project has deployed book group methodology as part of a broader objective to raise awareness of literature from the Mallee and to critically assess the active literary infrastructure available in the region. By “infrastructure”, we mean the available resources to foster reading cultures in this community, as well as to support broader cultural engagement and participation. Informed by the work of literary materialism, we understand literature to be a crucial site for the production, negotiation, and contestation of social and cultural narratives that shape our realities.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, we see literature in terms of infrastructure, enabling the circulation and exchange of ideas over time and space.<sup>4</sup> The concept of “infrastructure” has grown in literary scholarship proportionately with its embrace in cultural theory more broadly, and includes literary infrastructure of reception;<sup>5</sup> the mapping of literary institutions as infrastructure that supports national literary production;<sup>6</sup> and digital infrastructure for literary scholarship.<sup>7</sup> It has yet to be explicitly applied to thinking about the resources that support reading cultures and literary engagement in a community. These resources can be material, such as spaces, labour, and monies, but they are also immaterial, and involve discursive opportunities for community engagement and exchange around literary works. These opportunities for “literary sociability” face particular challenges in regional Australia, significantly related to population size and dispersal, and due to the urban-centric nature of cultural amenities.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, we want to explore the connection between literary infrastructure and the available imaginative resources of a community. What can opportunities for literary engagement in a shared context generate in terms of available imaginative resources for a place and its community?

In particular we are interested in the new knowledge that can be generated by reading in place—that is, by readers in the Mallee engaging with texts that concern, connect to, or are authored by writers from the Mallee. What knowledge about both the texts *and* the Mallee that would otherwise not be made available to literary researchers do book group discussions in place give rise to? In order to answer this question, we have sought to explore

readers' perceptions of, and relationships with, local literature through a series of Mallee-based reading groups over a three-year period. This series has focused on books which are by Mallee authors, set in the Mallee, or about the Mallee in some way. Aside from a few references in literary guides and literary histories, Mallee literature—as an identifiable regional literature—is relatively unknown both within and beyond the region itself. Where it is collectively referenced in Australian literary histories, it is characterized as reaffirming a white, colonial view of the Mallee as “one of the most barren regions in the world.”<sup>9</sup> While some key works of Mallee writing are widely read—and some, such as Alice Laphorne's *Mildura Calling*, have been read in the Mallee—these are never identified collectively as “Mallee” literature. In attempting to do so, our project aims to build awareness of Mallee literature as a regional literature that is distinct but diverse and is not limited to the kind of referential frames imposed by the region's historical association with agricultural labour, drought, and settler hardship.

### **Project methodology**

To date, we have experimented with two different methods of book group organization. We have undertaken reading group activities in a number of towns in the Mallee region: these have been both one-off reading group events in different towns, and a series of reading events in Mildura, the Mallee's largest centre. Ideally, we would have liked to tap into existing book groups, but these were not always available or accessible, resulting in the “artificial” construction of reading groups for our project. These were mostly organized with the assistance of the Mallee library network, although some Mallee towns are too small for dedicated library facilities. When a town was without a library, we recruited participants through local community centres or key contacts. The library network is a key infrastructure for reading culture in the Mallee, with libraries in main centres and some ongoing mobile library services which visit smaller towns. The libraries run dedicated engagement programs targeting local readers in a series of writer-focused events throughout the year (these are usually in the form of author appearances, including school visits and talks at the library). The libraries span the three local government areas that administratively constitute the Mallee and also facilitate book groups for members. Our project has tapped into this existing collective, drawing in participants who

were familiar with the structure of book group meetings, but also many others who were not.

As researchers, we actively participated in the sessions, rather than observing in person<sup>10</sup> or studying book groups at a distance.<sup>11</sup> This was due in part to the fact that we convened the groups explicitly for the purpose of the study: that is, we wanted to explain our interest and project to participants. We also wished to support participants, given that many readers were not regular book group members, and some had never attended a book group before. We acknowledge, however, that our direct participation in book group sessions reminded participants that they were part of a study rather than members of an informal social group with already established relationships. While we tried to keep our contributions to a minimum and not to direct discussions, we observed that our presence was both affording and limiting in different contexts, particularly in the one-off sessions.

From 2017–2019, there were 11 sessions in total: 5 one-off sessions in Mildura, Boort, Quambatook, Hopetoun, and Swan Hill, each lasting one hour, and 6 ongoing sessions at the Mildura library. Most participants were over 50 with some in their eighties and nineties (although our youngest participant was 17). There were only four men involved, and in a one-off capacity, which means that the majority of our data has been generated by women. Consequently, our sessions have tended to emphasize women's experience in their engagements with the texts. In total, approximately 70 readers took part in these different groups. While we were positively assisted in each book group location by library or community centre staff, it was in Mildura where the support of one librarian in particular was crucial to setting up the ongoing book group.<sup>12</sup> This librarian was tasked with community engagement for the Mildura library, so our book groups and reading events—funded by our research project—offered additional resources to his program. This became especially useful to him in the second year of the project, when his event budget was markedly reduced by the local council.

There were evidently varying degrees of comfort with literary activities and conversations amongst the participants in our book group events. Notably the more “regular” attendees developed a rapport with each other, and

because accustomed to our own presence in the group, eventually engaging in more informal conversation at the beginning and end of each session. We also observed an element of “self-regulation” in operation amongst some the participants, no doubt connected to the fact that these were essentially “research reading groups” with an underlying, externally imposed objective guiding them. The Swan Hill group, for instance, undertook a “warm-up” reading group the week before we met them, which speaks of an anxiety concerning the “worth” of their comments in a research-related forum. This group had already been in existence for a few years and was used to meeting with each other but not with “outsiders” like ourselves. This group also featured the highest number of people who did not complete high school, which may help to explain their lack of confidence in the worth of their observations in the context of a research project.

Jane Hartley and Sarah Turvey suggest that the process of book selection can sometimes be a political process amongst members of a reading group: “choosing how you choose can be another minefield.”<sup>13</sup> We controlled the book selection for our reading group sessions except on the occasion of Mildura History Week when we undertook to read a local history, suggested by the librarian, which prompted lively debate. We recognize that our control over selection meant that people’s tastes were not catered to, with participants being asked to read books they would not usually choose or attempt. One Mildura member dropped out as it “wasn’t what she expected it to be,” another went on an extended holiday and missed two sessions, and another would have preferred more crime, her favourite genre. Two of the readers in our on-going Mildura group, including the aforementioned reader, cited genre books as their preferred type, so for them the reading list was perhaps “against the grain” of their stated preferences. This prompted us to run a “Crime, coffee and cake” session at the Mildura library in 2019, which was an experiment with a larger crowd, centred on two popular works of rural crime fiction: Chris Hammer’s *Scrublands* (2018) and the light-hearted *Murder with the Lot* (2013) from the Rusty Bore trilogy by Sue Williams.

For the first one-off reading groups we organized, participants were recruited through flyers distributed via library and community networks in the Mallee region. Participants were told that they would need to read three Mallee novels over three months in advance of the session and that they

would be audio-recorded for research purposes. Before the event, we emailed participants to let them know that they might be prompted by us if needed, but that they were encouraged to speak freely about the books. The books for the one-off sessions were three contemporary novels which are set in different parts of the Victorian or South Australian Mallee: a crime/romance genre novel, Kerry McGinnis's *Mallee Sky* (2013), an expressionist, self-consciously literary novel by Michael Meehan, *The Salt of Broken Tears* (1999), and Carrie Tiffany's "rural apocalypse"<sup>14</sup> novel *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005).

As with all our sessions, refreshments were provided, including homemade biscuits, which were popular with the participants. This is part of our ethics of practice; we acknowledge the value of the participants' time and attention and attempt to put participants at ease through the communal act of sharing food. We began each session with an introduction to the project and the discussion started with the open-ended prompt: "What did you think of the book?" We would use further prompts if the discussion began to wane. At the end of the discussion, we indicated that we would send a survey to participants afterwards to capture demographic information.

The ongoing bi-monthly Mildura reading group contained four members from the previous Mildura one-off session who indicated their willingness to continue working with us. Some of the participants knew each other through their employment at the Mildura library, which gave the group a sense of stability. Given that we had already established an association with the Mildura library, recruitment for this group was enabled directly through emails to the community engagement officer. As mentioned previously, the books for the bi-monthly reading groups that ran during 2017 were primarily chosen by us, with the exception of two books that were selected by the Mildura library's community engagement coordinator. The first book group session centred around Charlie Archbold's newly released young adult novel *Mallee Boys* (2017), and was attended by the author who answered readers' questions.<sup>15</sup> The second session, timed to coincide with Mildura History Month, featured the local history *Mildura Calling* (1965) by Alice Laphorne and *The Oswald Album: the photographs of Ernest E. Oswald, taken between 1889 and his death in 1892* (2000), which is made up of images by a photographer who died in a fire while trying to retrieve a precious Bible belonging to his friend.<sup>16</sup> These second and third books were chosen by the



librarian, providing a contrast with the fiction we had originally chosen. This was followed by *The Wind on the Water* (1938), a neglected novel by Myra Morris set in the fictional “Brown’s Town” on the fringe of the Victorian Mallee. The fourth book was *Time Flow Softly* (1958), the second volume in Nancy Cato’s epic trilogy of the Murray River, *All the Rivers Run*. Finally, we ended with *Watershed* (2005), a novel by Bundjalung author Fabienne Bayet-Charlton set in the South Australian Riverland: a region proximate to the Mallee, which shares its history of irrigation and colonization.

In order to produce results from the book group sessions, transcripts were made and interpreted for patterns or themes. Samples were chosen for inclusion in subsequent publications; where extracts involve more than one speaker, A B C D & E are used to anonymize the contributions of the participants. During the transcription, there were issues of “translation.” While we all spoke the same language (Australian English) in our sessions, there were some terms, references, and place names that we did not recognize at the time of the book group meetings which needed to be unpacked during the transcription and interpretation process. Consequently, we have identified some comments which seem resistant to “unpacking” by us, even after further consideration. These included names of towns that no longer exist, references to particular people and the relationships between them, inside jokes, references to specific historical events, all of which relied on shared local knowledge. Sometimes we would break the flow of the discussion to ask people to elaborate, and at other times we left these utterances unexplained. These moments were reminders of our outsider status as researchers: we could never fully know the context from which the readers were speaking. It also reminded us that place knowledge is complex and not easily available or transmissible in research situations.

### **Regional readers**

There have been large-scale quantitative studies on Australian participation in book culture, such as *Reading the Reader: A Survey of Australian Reading Taste* (2016) by Jan Zwar, David Throsby, and Callum Morgan, and the Australian Cultural Fields project by Michelle Kelly, Modesto Gayo, and David Carter. The *Reading the Reader* survey found that 92% of Australians are book readers; occasional readers make up 51%, while frequent readers account for

41%.<sup>17</sup> The results of this study are more favourable than those of the Australian Cultural Fields team, which found that there is a minority Australian reading class who are rich in cultural capital.<sup>18</sup> The data analyzed by Kelly, Gayo, and Carter shows that 40% of Australians are barely engaged with reading or reading practices at all. They also found that the division between readers and non-readers was striking. The authors note that “clearly the social contexts which facilitate the habit of book reading are not available equally to all.”<sup>19</sup> In “Australian Stories: Books and Reading in the Nation,” a chapter deriving from the same project, Carter and Kelly note that literary festivals and reading groups or book clubs had a participation rate of less than 10% respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Our project is more interested in reading practices that are not concerned with contemporaneity and celebrity. Literary festivals are usually organized around the promotion of new books, with a thinly veiled hierarchy of influence.<sup>21</sup> The books we have been reading with groups for this project are usually not brand new; in fact, two of them, *Mildura Calling* and *The Wind on the Water*, have been around for 50 years or more, and with the exception of the best-selling crime novel *Scrublands*, they tend to have little or no celebrity status.

If there is a reading class in Australia, Carter and Kelly argue, then “it is concentrated in the band of three occupational classes extending from high professional through lower management/professional to intermediate occupations.”<sup>22</sup> This implies that “blue collar,” or working class groups are effectively left out of this reading class. They note that educational level makes a marked difference to the likelihood of someone reading and liking contemporary Australian novels.<sup>23</sup> This research suggests to us that a higher level of education tends to correspond with more frequent reading and appreciation of literary works. Given that the books we asked people to read in our study have been almost exclusively contemporary Australian novels, this finding is significant to our project.

David Wright observes that “modern literature” was generally only liked by people in his study with university qualifications, which “trains one to appreciate higher forms of reading,” as he contends.<sup>24</sup> For many residents of the Mallee, as in the regional areas of the country more generally, levels of education can be substantially lower than in urban areas of Australia.<sup>25</sup> And

yet we surmise that given the number of people interested in book groups in the Mallee—around 10% if corresponding with national trends—there’s a range of readers from those with low educational levels (high school completion or below) and those with postgraduate degrees.<sup>26</sup> This variety that is not always seen in the city-based book groups that have previously been studied.<sup>27</sup> Historically, Australian reading communities have tended to compensate for the lack of learning opportunities available within institutionalized education systems through various forms of literary infrastructure, such as Mechanics Institutes, the Bush Library network, the Australasian Home Reading Union (AHRU), and the Australian Reading Circle and the Council For Adult Education (CAE) through which books could be distributed and shared.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary reading groups continue these practices of sharing and sociability, connecting readers in isolated locations.<sup>29</sup>

Although they were constructed for the purposes of our research, our reading group sessions revealed that people could be receptive to self-consciously “literary” texts such as Michael Meehan’s *The Salt of Broken Tears*, even if such texts may not have been universally appreciated in all groups. Since this book was obviously “challenging,” people responded to it in a variety of ways, and while it was generally not well-liked, it generated much reflection, including frustration about its opaqueness. The book was a particular focal point for geographic discussions of the Mallee, as it references a range of towns and environments which were very familiar to readers. Knowing the author was born in the now tiny town of Lalbert prompted readers’ speculations about his imaginative relation to the place.

One of the reasons that people join book groups is because it encourages them to leave their comfort zone, to read books that they might normally overlook or avoid.<sup>30</sup> This was affirmed in our reader responses, which, while often expressing ambivalent feelings about the books, still appreciated the opportunity to encounter texts they would otherwise not have. A Quambatook reader reflected on his efforts to prepare for the session: “Kerry McGinnis didn’t take very long to get into. I enjoyed *Tears* and I’m so glad [a fellow reader] said ‘keep reading.’ We were working over harvest so I’ve only just come back. There are quite a few older readers who stick to particular genres. I like getting out of the box.”

Wendy Griswold's theory of the regional "reading class" has been very influential in our thinking about reader responses (2008). Griswold and others have discussed the associations people make between authors and the states or regions in which they live, even including maps of authors and the locations of their texts. These associations are not well mapped when it comes to the Victorian Mallee region, with many readers unable to name any works of literature from that area, with the exception of nonfiction, generally works of amateur history or memoir written by locals. Few participants had consciously sought to read works of fiction featuring the Mallee region, no doubt due to its low to non-existent profile. For many readers, we learned, it was a revelatory experience to read about familiar places in novels, encouraging them to seek out more and undertake their own extra-textual research.

The relationship between representations of the Mallee in the chosen books and the "real" world was a common theme. As Hartley argues, for reading groups "the relationship between the book and the world" (reading-group observation and experience) is "brought to bear upon the book."<sup>31</sup> We found that when Mallee places were named in novels, readers were alert to the tiniest details and felt irritated when the literary evocation of sites they knew did not accord with their own experience or knowledge of place. Some readers were prompted to "fact check" or research historical references that they encountered in the texts.<sup>32</sup> There were also occasions when readers took us "beyond the book," as when we were driven in the dark to the grave site of an Indian hawker, Cabel Singh, who died in 1917 and was cremated in a Sikh ceremonial burning in the main street of Quambatook. This unexpected night-time cemetery visit was directly prompted by the reading of Meehan's *The Salt of Broken Tears* in which Singh appears as a prominent character.

We identified a two-way traffic between life experience and the interpretation of the Mallee texts under discussion.<sup>33</sup> Participants would use the novel as a starting point for telling anecdotes drawn from their own lives or from friends, family, or wider acquaintances. Themes which recurred in the one-off sessions related to living conditions in the Mallee, the most notable being the camel-riding hawkers (such as Singh) who sold goods from door to door, dust storms, mouse plagues, and the Better Farming Train (an agricultural demonstration train) which travelled around the state

of Victoria in the 1920s and 1930s “educating” farmers and housewives in agricultural and domestic “arts.”

At the Quambatook Resource Centre, after the discussion had finished, we commented that we had not found cohesive organizations of writers in the Mallee, such as the state-based Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW), which might have served to draw attention to Mallee literature, and wondered aloud why this might be the case:

A: It’s because so many people who have written about the Mallee have run from it because they don’t want that connection.

B: Run screaming you mean?

Here, the suggestion seems to be that the Mallee is hostile to creative activity—that writers might need to “escape” in order to cultivate a literary career. One participant noted that the first speaker might be planning to “run screaming” from the Mallee and threatened to “warn” her husband. We read this as a form of playful teasing, given her “high-brow” tastes which did not align neatly with the preferences of other readers in the group. Melbourne was suggested by the first speaker as a place of retreat, where the “horror of the Mallee” could be “exorcised”. This was jokingly deflected by other participants:

C: She’s hit one too many kangaroos I think.

D: I can’t imagine a Mallee writer wanting to go to Melbourne. Sorry—I’m the opposite to you. Melbourne would be the last place I would go to.

This exchange highlights the awkwardness engendered by the first speaker’s description of the Mallee as “horrific.” The second speaker tried to leaven this assessment with humour, while the third speaker expressed an aversion to Melbourne, the nearest capital city, regarding rural places more favourably.

As with regular reading groups, negative remarks about a text tend to inhibit people from saying the opposite or disagreeing in some way. Participants may have found it hard to articulate their ambivalence about living in the Mallee without being subjected to mild teasing or jokes at their expense. One respondent in Quambatook felt a certain affinity with the mother who ultimately kills a young girl in *The Salt of Broken Tears*. Another reader said:

“You were sympathetic to her because you were dragged to the Mallee just like her.” The implication of this remark is that suffering induced by a dislike for the Mallee can lead to anti-social behaviour. As Todd has noted, there is a close correlation between expressions of sympathy for characters and retelling of readers’ own autobiographical experiences.<sup>34</sup> In this case, another reader was making connections between a reader’s autobiography and her empathy for a character from the novel. Potentially this brief exchange shows us how book discussions are internally regulated, to build consensus and minimize differing views.

The readers we encountered demonstrated interest in the biographies of authors who were born or lived in the Mallee—clearly, autochthony and residence are of significance to readers. We perceived a desire to know which authors “belonged” to the Mallee—such as the poet John Shaw Neilson and the novelist, poet, and short story writer Myra Morris—in the same way that other authors are associated with different regions.<sup>35</sup> In Hopetoun, the three participants sought to make connections with the authors given that they had either come from the Mallee or lived there for a period of time. They often referred to the authors by their first names as though they were old friends, as when this reader spoke of the author Michael Meehan in familiar terms:

A: Michael’s I found strange—I found it too all over the place ... there were four of us that were here and had the same.

B: If something doesn’t get me in the first chapter I’m lost ... that’s just the sort of reader I am.

As mentioned earlier, Meehan’s novel was often compared unfavourably with *Mallee Sky*, a work of genre fiction by Kerry McGinnis:

C: [About *Mallee Sky*] That one and a story behind it... I could relate to it all the way through.

[...]

A: The bells were ringing... I was wondering if she was connected to the fella that started here.

In this comment, a male participant seeks to link the author Kerry McGinnis to Peter McGinnis, an early settler in Hopetoun.<sup>36</sup> Readers often expressed a need to place authors in terms of their family relations and connections to the region, even when, like Kerry McGinnis, who was born in Adelaide, they do not have this direct genealogy.<sup>37</sup>

Readers seemed aware of how non-Mallee people might see their region in a negative light. When reading the Myra Morris novel *The Wind on the Water* (1937), readers in the ongoing Mildura group talked about representations of the Mallee and how they tended to be “bad”:

A: I find it really interesting though—the whole Mallee theme or the country theme—whether, if they are bad books and how they reflect on the country—that’s something I always like to think about.

B: People like us who live here and see it every day, you wonder how somebody who had lived in the city all their lives would interpret it.

In this context the reader uses the word “bad” to mean “unflattering.” Given that a number of the books we had read together were bleak or troubling, it’s not surprising that it should come up in conversation. When reading they seek to find traces of the “beauty” of their region while also acknowledging the “harshness” and “hostility” of the environment.

The Mildura readers seemed especially alert to the social dynamics of small towns, as when they talked about Fran, the central character in *The Wind on the Water*, who was a newcomer to Brown’s Town, “on the edge” of the Mallee:

A: I think because these towns at that time, you’re only talking a couple of hundred people—they wouldn’t know what she might think of them because she’s had some education, plays classical music and might look down on them so they’re not going to be particularly friendly towards her because they might think that they are to be laughed at, made fun of—because their experiences of a diversity of people are very narrow—it’s hard to imagine what it was like so I can imagine that in some towns it would take a long, long time to be accepted and make friends.

B: If one person has put the kybosh on you, it’s your friend and you’re not going to go against them. Boort is not a big place. Everyone would know everyone since they were born and know all their characteristics.

C: And know everybody’s business.

D: It’s bad enough in Mildura sometimes.

A: I know!

Here, one of the participants assumes that the fictional Brown's Town is synonymous with the real town of Boort, possibly due to our acknowledgement of Myra Morris's birthplace at the beginning of the session. The four speakers recognize that it can be difficult to find acceptance as a newcomer in regional towns and cities in the Mallee. Aspects of the readers' own life experience in Mildura are brought to bear on their reading of Fran's social predicament in *The Wind on the Water*.

### Shared Mallee identities

We propose that a shared sense of "Mallee identity" was discernible through analysis of book group transcripts. All of the sessions, both one-off and ongoing, elicited reflections on Mallee identity that also spoke of a sense of distinction from, and unknowability to, their urban counterparts.

Discussing *Mallee Boys*, the Mildura participants speculated about the differences between language use in the city and the country:

A: The words they use to describe things, I don't think people who lived in the city would know or realize why those words are used to describe those things.

B: That's true, yeah.

C: We speak a different language, don't we?

A: People look at you funny when you talk about something.

Just as the participants' colloquial language is different, so too are their experiences of rural life. At times, they used the books under discussion to make these cultural distinctions:

A: In the *Mallee Boys* book when he's in the river and the cow floats past—somebody who had never been out of Melbourne or Sydney would say 'what?!'

B: Of course there's a cow in the river. Why wouldn't there be a cow in the river?

In a discussion of *Watershed*, the Mildura group talked about the supportiveness of a small-town community in relation to a former swimming champion's life-threatening alcoholism following the death of her son in the Murray River.

A: It's interesting how the whole town is watching her ... they are not intervening, they are not trying to stop her or



help her but they're watching in case she does fall flat on her face, that they will pick her up again. She's become an identity because of her grief not for her past glory. Everyone can see that's she's completely consumed and overwhelmed by it.

B: Yes, that's what I mean, they are all kind of...

C: She's ours, you don't...

D: It's like a cocoon around her.

A: Yeah.

As this exchange shows, readers made incisive social observations about small-town life, in this case debating the reasons that the community did not intervene when Eve was spiralling downwards after the death of her son.

### History-telling

The Victorian Mallee region shares a dark and bloody colonial history with other parts of Australia, yet the details have not been comprehensively documented to date.<sup>38</sup> We discerned that there was a reluctance to discuss this aspect of Mallee history on the part of most readers. *Mildura Calling*, the amateur history of Mildura by former librarian Alice Laphorne, prompted careful responses. As convenors, we drew attention to the following passage, hoping for some discussion about its treatment of Indigenous people:

When, above the sleeping city, the clock in the tower of the Carnegie Library strikes the hour, does the ghost of some homeless aborigine seeking by night his lost camping ground, turn in affright and flee the brilliantly lighted streets, which were once a wilderness of Mallee scrub? No mean feature of Mildura's skyline is this tower whose illuminated clock, facing four ways, can be seen from some distance out in the settlement.<sup>39</sup>

We chose this paragraph because it had perplexed us as outsiders and suggested possibilities for interpretation. Participants were initially resistant to saying anything about this passage other than discussing the clocktower and its prominent position in the town. Then, towards the end of the session, one reader talked about the fleeting presence of Aboriginal people in the text, and returned attention to the passage with a different emphasis:

There's something that I really struggled with, without even realizing. There's this whole idyllic view of Mildura

and the Chaffeys and yet she mentions the homeless Aborigine and the clocktower—she does mention the grave—to me, there was some comprehension of what happened to them, when she talks about the homeless Aborigine.

This led the discussion to the Indigenous population of Mildura, which had previously been absent from the readers' commentary:

A: There were originally Aboriginal people and then for a period there weren't any here. The census in the 1860s there were only 39 Aboriginal people here.

B: There was probably a good reason for that.

C: Would the census of Aboriginal people have been accurate at that time?

A: No.

C: There may have been more.

A: There may have been more ... there may have been Aboriginal people from another area.

This exchange is reflective of what we have repeatedly encountered in our Mallee reading groups thus far: a reluctance to talk openly about Indigenous history in the Mallee and the ongoing presence of Indigenous people in the region. On this and other occasions, participants were at pains to insist that either there were no Indigenous people in the area of their towns at the time of settlement, or that in some ways it was a “neutral zone,” where Indigenous people may have gathered, but where they have no direct claim to country. When we alluded to the discovery of human bones on a farm in *Mallee Sky*, others did not feel inclined to take the observation further. The participants in our reading groups have been overwhelmingly white, to date, with one exception, and consequently cross-cultural issues are broached with caution. This is, in part, symptomatic of the broader Australian reluctance to fully acknowledge the violence of frontier history and the legacies of colonization. Although this is not exclusive to regional and rural contexts, these communities must confront dispossession and tensions over land ownership more directly, given their key historical role in the economic project of agriculture.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion: Readers' knowledge: a precious resource

Our project has thus far operated on a small scale, yet the book group reading sessions have shown that participatory regional reading can generate illuminating data. In the first iteration of book groups, during the one-off sessions in different towns, participants “recognized” the Mallee in the texts we read but there was not enough time to elaborate further, except via the follow-up survey distributed afterwards.

Upon reflection we have realized that we set up the terms of the discussion fairly narrowly, focussing on well-known Mallee tropes such as dust, mouse plagues, and hawkers, which were common to all three texts. The readers' personal reading preferences were discussed briefly, yet there was much that we were unable to elicit from our participants. We did, however, gain a sense of the regimes of value in operation amongst book group readers. One participant in the town of Quambatook was keen to let us know that she was armed with cultural capital by describing *Mallee Sky* as “just a Mills & Boon in the Australian bush.” Devlin-Glass has observed that some women readers “position themselves quite precisely (and, at times, resistantly) in taste hierarchies.”<sup>41</sup> By contrast, one of the nine regular readers in our Mildura bi-monthly group was proud of being a genre reader and often brought pop culture references into the discussions. We recognize that there is major potential for reading groups to be used as a methodology for exploring the tastes and preferences and ideas of Australian readers, however this is outside the purview of this article. We intend to consider the particularity of this regional reading community through the lens of taste and preferences in future research.

As indicated, we observed an element of local “history-telling” in the book group sessions. This may be due to a shared feeling that history is not yet “fixed” in the Mallee region. The discussion of *Mildura Calling*, at least, suggests that this lack of historical scholarship urgently needs addressing. The close relationship between book group activities and “history-telling” draws attention to the ways in which oral cultures can be reactivated through book-related activities. As Fuller and Rehberg Sedo argue: “Re-experiencing a book through the medium of other people’s narratives can begin to alter or complicate the ways that inhabitants of a city

understand the history and contemporary realities of the places they occupy and the spaces that they move through.”<sup>42</sup>

The capacity of book groups to generate localized place and community knowledge has clearly emerged from our study, as has the recognition that such knowledge is contested, multiple, and remade in ongoing ways—in part through discursive forums such as these. The early findings of our study have shown that people with comparatively low educational levels can be active participants in reading groups.<sup>43</sup> To date, our investigations have engaged with people who already identify as book readers. This means that they read for pleasure as well as for work and other purposes. There are obvious barriers to joining these groups such as the requirement for a high level of literacy, membership in the local library network, and the leisure time to attend meetings.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, we also acknowledge that, despite the educational diversity within the groups, there were significant commonalities in age, gender, and (apparently, as this wasn’t surveyed) ethnicity, with the overwhelming majority seeming to be of non-Indigenous background. Given the ethnic diversity of many parts of the Mallee (Mildura, for instance, has over 70 different cultural groups), this suggests, perhaps, the tendency for literary infrastructure to solicit people of certain backgrounds because their organizational structures are more familiar—and amenable—to some groups than others. With recently awarded funding from the Australian Research Council, we can continue this project for a further three years (2021–2023), deploying targeted techniques for engaging with more diverse communities, which take the infrastructure of shared reading beyond the traditional reading group format. Our colleague, visual artist Torika Bolatagici, is joining the research team to bring “The Community Reading Room” to the Mallee; this is a space for culturally diverse communities to share books, tell stories, and perform narratives, and will serve as a key part of our expanded methodology.

While registering its limits, we can also see that our original series of one-off book group events was too ambitious, requiring people to read three novels and comment on them in a single hour session, without any prior familiarity with us. This might be described as a “drive in, drive out” model of book group coordination compared with the more sustained practice of running a bi-monthly book group over a year. It seems that ongoing research reading groups offer a more fertile atmosphere for expressing intimate thoughts and

feelings and engaging in personal storytelling. This is not to discount the findings from the one-off sessions but to note that a key part of the success of book groups is the establishment of safety and intimacy: a sense of connection. Indeed, the Mildura sessions have allowed us to establish ongoing collaborations with at least two members. We regard the entire group as potential advisors whose knowledge we can draw on in the future. The extra time enabled by the ongoing book group session format allowed participants to move beyond the well-known aspects of Mallee life towards deeper engagement with emotional and psychological dimensions of living in the Victorian Mallee.

As mentioned earlier, a central goal of our project is to draw attention to the under-recognized role of the reader in the perpetuation of Mallee literary culture. Patrick Buckridge has argued that reading has always been slightly “embattled” in Australia, with its status as a central component of the nation’s culture threatened, displaced, or encroached upon by cinema, television, and sport. Historically, writing has been seen as an activity which is more productive and worthy of support. Given the historical mistrust of bookishness that Buckridge identifies, Australia might always have been ready to value an obviously active, productive pursuit—writing books—above a supposedly passive, reflective one—reading them.<sup>45</sup>

Given the pre-eminence of the writer in Australian literary culture, we seek to position the reader, too, as a crucial figure, and to recognize the immense value of informal practices of readership through our book group events. Following Lyons and Taksa, we seek to “widen our vision of literary culture” by, paradoxically, focussing on a situated context in which a “reader’s version of literary history” can be assembled.<sup>46</sup> A related goal is to contribute to an expanded literary infrastructure in a region that has long been associated with a lack of “culture.” After undertaking book group sessions in the region, we are more aware of the abundance of readerly knowledge that exists in the Mallee, hiding in plain sight. A striking feature of our one-off discussions was the informed way our participants talked about place—their mental geographies are invariably extensive, covering most of the Victorian Mallee.<sup>47</sup>

The scarcity of cultural opportunities for the communities in this region, and the exclusive nature of the Mildura Writers Festival that dominates its

contemporary literary identity, inevitably reaffirm a picture of meagre literary life. Nevertheless, the resources for enhancing literary infrastructure exist, both in the broad history and diversity of Mallee writing, and in the social infrastructure of the Mallee, which has seen our project supported by the generous and engaged participation of some of its readers. Readers' knowledge, tapped through collective reading practices, affords the potential for enhancing existing literary resources, allowing scholars to access new registers of understanding both the texts themselves and the Mallee and its communities. As we move to the next stage of this project, we aim to explore the benefits of diversified and inclusive literary infrastructure, as well as the collaborative potential of local readers contributing to their own literary history and to an expanded knowledge of their place.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES

Emily Potter is a literary and cultural studies researcher in the fields of literary narrative, place-making, and postcolonial environments. Her books include *Plastic Water: The social and material life of bottled water* (2015, MIT Press, with Gay Hawkins and Kane Race) and the forthcoming *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the field on settler-colonial place* (2019, Intellect/University of Chicago Press). She is Associate Head of School (Research) and senior lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University.

Brigid Magner is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and founding member of the non/fictionLab research group at RMIT University. Her research is concerned with trans-Tasman literary culture, Australian authorship, literary heritage and place-making. She is the author of *Locating Australian Literary Memory* (2019) and Book Reviews editor of the *Literary Geographies* journal and co-editor of the *Journal of Australian Studies* (with Emily Potter).

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Katie Holmes and Kylie Mirmohamadi, "Howling Wilderness and Promised Land: Imagining the Victorian Mallee, 1840–1914." *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 191–213.

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<sup>2</sup> See Paul Carter, *Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region* (Crawley, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 2010), 30.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Claire Westall, “World-literary Resources and Energetic Materialism,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 3 (2017): 265–76.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 3 (2013): 327–43.

<sup>5</sup> Andre Lardinois et al., *Texts, Transmissions, Reception: Modern Approaches to Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Wenche Ommundsen and Michael Jacklin, “Mapping Literary Infrastructure in Australia: A Report to the Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board,” Australia Council, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Tully Barnett, “Textual Infrastructure: Digitisation and the Immersive Reading Experience,” Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Project, 2019–2021.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Comyn has studied literary sociability in Australian Mechanics’ Institutes, arguing that events like popular readings, lecture series, and soirées worked to create a cohesive community in five goldfields towns; “Literary Sociability on the Goldfields: The Mechanics’ Institute in the Colony of Victoria, 1854–1870.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 23, no. 4 (2018): 448. Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon have observed that the “concept of literary sociability can be used to map out a new field of inquiry in Australian literary history – or at least ways of reimagining existing accounts of that history”; *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), vii.

<sup>9</sup> Major Thomas Mitchell, cited in Peter Pierce, ed., *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), 335.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Clark and Marguerite Nolan, “Book Clubs and Reconciliation: A Pilot Study on Book Clubs Reading the ‘Fictions of Reconciliation,’” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 56, (2014): <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2014/05/01/book-clubs-and-reconciliation-n-a-pilot-study-on-book-clubs-reading-the-fictions-of-reconciliation/>.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Poole, “The Women’s Chapter: Women’s Reading Groups in Victoria,” *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 3 (2003): 263–81, and Frances Devlin-Glass, “More than a Reader and Less than a Critic: Literary Authority and Women’s Book-discussion Groups,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24, no. 5 (2001): 571–85.

<sup>12</sup> One participant joked that this librarian “coerced” her into joining the study, but she was “glad he did.”

<sup>13</sup> Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey, *The Reading Groups Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 46.

<sup>14</sup> Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989–2007* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 20.

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<sup>15</sup> While we do not elaborate here, we discerned from this session that the presence of the author was a constraining force on participants’ “speaking freely” about the book, even while there was a degree of excitement generated by the author’s attendance.

<sup>16</sup> The readers told us that Oswald died because Mildura did not yet have a hospital at the time of the fire.

<sup>17</sup> David Throsby, Jan Zwar, and Callum Morgan, “Reading the Reader: A Survey of Australian Reading Habits: A Summary of Findings from the 2016 Macquarie University / Australia Council for the Arts Survey of Australian Book Readers” (2016), [http://www.businessandconomics.mq.edu.au/our\\_departments/Economics/econ\\_research/reach\\_network/book\\_project/readers](http://www.businessandconomics.mq.edu.au/our_departments/Economics/econ_research/reach_network/book_project/readers).

<sup>18</sup> Throsby, Zwar, and Morgan, “Reading the Reader.”

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Kelly, Modesto Gayo, and David Carter, “Rare books? The Divided Field of Reading and Book Culture in Contemporary Australia,” *Continuum* 32, no. 3 (2018): 1–14.

<sup>20</sup> David Carter and Michelle Kelly, “Australian Stories: Books and Reading in the Nation,” in *Publishing Means Business: Australian Perspectives*, ed. Aaron Mannion and Millicent Weber (Melbourne, Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 149.

<sup>21</sup> We recognize that our project’s focus on books is not necessarily representative of most Australians’ reading habits. Readers may engage with magazines, newspapers, as well as online sources.

<sup>22</sup> Carter and Kelly, “Australian Stories,” 163.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>24</sup> David Wright, “Cultural Capital and the Literary Field,” *Cultural Trends* 15, no. 2–3 (2006): 132.

<sup>25</sup> Of people aged 15 and over in Mallee (Commonwealth Electoral Divisions), 11.5% reported having completed Year 12 as their highest level of educational attainment, 17.7% had completed a Certificate III or IV and 7.2% had completed an Advanced Diploma or Diploma. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2016 Census Quickstats”: [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/CED227](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/CED227)

<sup>26</sup> See Throsby, Zwar, and Morgan, “Reading the Reader,” for an estimation of the number of readers involved with book groups in Australia.

<sup>27</sup> See Devlin-Glass, “More than a Reader,” and Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> The Australian journal *All About Books for Australian and New Zealand Readers* (1928–1938) also supported John O’London’s reading groups, based on the model of the London journal.



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<sup>29</sup> Brigid Magner and Emily Potter, “Brothers and Sisters of the Mallee: Book Talk between Isolated Readers across Time,” *Westerly* 65, no. 2 (2020): 18–35.

<sup>30</sup> See Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey, *The Reading Groups Book*, 135.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> At least two participants brought along newspaper articles sourced online that related to historical events or figures mentioned in the books (such as the hawker Cabel Singh, the Better Farming Train, or Murray riverboat captains).

<sup>33</sup> Hartley and Turvey argue that “the point is not to map book and life closely but that the traffic should be two-way.” They refer to a “two-way” traffic between the book and the lives of people in the reading group. They note that it can be described as “three-way” traffic if the internal dynamics of the group are also taken into account (*The Reading Groups Book*, 135).

<sup>34</sup> Zazie Todd, “Talking About Books: A Reading Group Study,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 2, no. 4 (2008): 261.

<sup>35</sup> John Shaw Neilson was born on February 22, 1872 at Penola, South Australia, but spent much of his working life as an itinerant labourer in the Victorian Mallee. Myra Morris was born on May 15, 1893 at Boort and later moved to Frankston, Melbourne.

<sup>36</sup> Peter McGinnis was an early settler in Hopetoun who is known for adopting an Indigenous boy named Jowley who may have survived a massacre in the area. See Paul Carter, *Ground Truthing*, 168.

<sup>37</sup> The “expanded” Mallee bioregion, which extends across four different Australian states, indicates the flexibility of what might constitute a “Mallee author.”

<sup>38</sup> Richard Broome et al., *Mallee Country: Land, People, History* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 11–45.

<sup>39</sup> Alice Laphorne, *Mildura Calling* (Mildura: Mildura Gallery Society, 1965): 40.

<sup>40</sup> Maggie Nolan argues that book club readings may challenge academic orthodoxies in relation to literature, particularly through considering modes of textual engagement that foreground literature’s capacity to generate shock and unsettle identifications. Her case study argues that discussing books in the shared space of the book club can be a vehicle for readers to acknowledge Australia’s often violent settler colonial history. “Reading Massacre: Book Club Responses to *Landscape of Farewell*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 62, no. 1 (2020): 74–96.

<sup>41</sup> Devlin-Glass, “More than a Reader,” 572.

<sup>42</sup> DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Danielle Fuller, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 237.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Long, writing about book clubs in Houston, Texas, observes that “it is a rare group that includes even one participant who has not attended college.” Almost all

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reading group members in Long's study had completed a college education. *Book Clubs*, 61–62.

<sup>44</sup> We noted that some participants would arrive only to be called home at short notice by dependants.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Buckridge, "The History of Reading in Australia," *Oceanic Literatures, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1900–present): Non Fiction and Life Writing, Print Culture and Digital Humanities* (Oxford Research Encyclopedias, 2018), <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-570>.

<sup>46</sup> Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading, 1890–1930*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992): 2.

<sup>47</sup> Brigid Magner and Emily Potter, "Shared reading in the Victorian Mallee," in *Book Publishing in Australia: A Living Legacy*, edited by Millicent Weber and Aaron Mannion (Melbourne: Monash University Press 2019): 177–208.

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