

Small-town Melancholy

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Review of *Gothic NZ: The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture*, edited by Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006).

This book—an evocation of Gothic elements in New Zealand culture—rapidly announces itself as an impossible project, or at least, as a project dependent on an actively sympathetic disposition in its interpreters. It is, writes one of the editors, Jennifer Lawn, in an introduction at once knowledgeably confident and frustratingly tentative, ‘both too early and too late to write of a New Zealand Gothic’ (p. 11). There is evidence both for and against a significant body of gothic characteristics in local cultural production, so that whether one discerns relevant characteristics depends on one’s angle of vision: ‘flick [it] just a fraction [...] and the opposite picture appears: gothic is revealed as endemic to New Zealand’s self-representation’ (p.11). Lawn contends that one cannot say what gothic is, in the sense of a proactive entity (p. 15); rather, it ‘works in a manner more akin to a shifting warp of the familiar’ (p.15).

In an attempt to induce such a generalised shift in perception—to persuade the reader to pass repeatedly over the border between the ‘conventional and the creepy’ (p. 17)—this innovative thematic study offers a multi-vocal argument dispersed across a range of media and genres. Gothic markers such as ‘heaviness’ (p. 13) unsuccessful ‘repression’ (p. 59) ‘a hidden “return” from below’ (p. 62), and fascinations with death, madness and loss, are pursued not just through literature and film but also through photography, architecture, television safety

advertisements, street-art and fashion. There is a predominance of analysis of the works of others. Insightful examples of this genre include Misha Kavka's chapter contrasting home renovation shows with films by Jane Campion and Alison McLean, Elizabeth Hale's consideration of the Antipodes as a redemptive zone in *The Navigator* and *Under the Mountain*, Sarah Shieff's reflection on racism in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Stephen Turner and Scott Wilson's work on public safety advertisements. *Gothic NZ* also foregrounds interpretation itself as creative and uncanny. This is made explicit in a reprinted essay by Justin Paton on an exhibition by the artist Saskia Leek entitled 'Ghost Painting'. Paton's essay teams Leek's paintings of Victorian settlers picnicking uneasily in the Dunedin bush with Bill Manhire's earlier poem on the same theme, and with a reproduction of the 1863 painting—itsself based on a photograph, Paton tells us—which inspired both the poem and Leek's reconstruction of the ancestral picnic scene as evoked by Manhire. The upwelling of the past that often gives rise to a sense of the gothic is therefore active in this diachronic 'creative séance', as is reference to *Gothic NZ's* key theoretical assertion, explored here and in a number of other chapters: that it is the fragile, awkward, displaced, yet powerfully destructive activities of settler Pakeha culture that have caused cultural products in the present to be haunted by gothic energies.

To reinforce their case, which is elaborated from slender pre-existing evidence, the editors have also made the unusual move of including other material which performs rather than analyses the gothic. The photographs have the most impact: deadpan, spooky images by Yvonne Todd here find a particularly productive context, while Mark Jackson tries less successfully to persuade that the photographed tattoos by Christopher Braddock provoke 'a resonance between tattoo and taboo, between the doubling of a skin incision and a realm of prohibitions, profanities and sacred' (p. 98) that is equal in complexity to his own layered, ambitious prose. There are also

poems by Bill Manhire, Jack Ross and Olivia Macassey which explore themes of 'disorder and early sorrow' (p. 76) including the lingering pain/pleasure of contemplating vanished lives. In its mixed-media richness this is at times a sensuous and intriguing book which collages some of the best of New Zealand writing and art.

However, *Gothic NZ* is also rather a frustrating volume, and not fully satisfying on a first reading: it seemed all entrées and desserts with no main course on which to rely for nutrition. This effect is partly due to some uncertainty about its audience: is it a volume for those wishing to learn about the gothic, or is it an almost-coffee-table treat for those who already understand the mode well enough to appreciate its more subtle, attenuated manifestations? Specifically, the structure of the book is not ideal if one comes to the topic with a desire to learn. Lawn's teasing introduction is followed by the strongest piece in the volume: Martin Edmond's grounded account of the development of a gothic sensibility while growing up in Taranaki contemplating the mystery and weirdness of the lives of others. Edmond finds kinship with the 'small-town melancholy' (p. 32) of Ronald Hugh Morrieson's novels, but his references to the gothic mode in New Zealand literature, along with Lawn's signposting of Michael Johnson, Maurice Gee and Janet Frame as other writers to be viewed in that light are not sustained through other chapters to produce a detailed, foundational account. Instead, we encounter ruined foundations in David Craig's chapter on the recent architectural art-photography of Ann Shelton, Allan McDonald and Gavin Hipkins. While initially clearly connected to the book's theme and designed to introduce the visual art/performative strand of the project, this essay rapidly becomes elusive in its structure and references. The more prosaic article by Ian Lochhead on the mid-19th century translation of Gothic revival architecture from Britain to colonial New Zealand might have done better duty in this position, or a chapter on

local gothic literature perhaps, commissioned specifically for the volume.

On a second reading however, the careful work of the editors in making productive connections and juxtapositions between these diverse contributions becomes more evident and I developed a greater appreciation for the rewards of forming the publication in this way. There is even a good-humoured critique both of the volume and the conference from which it originated in an afterword by Ian Wedde. 'How Gothic is it?' he asks, poking gentle fun at the pretension and circularity of assumptions about the gothic, while acknowledging the heuristic value of the concept of the Gothic in asserting that 'some of the serious, core questions asked by, and in the gothic narrative [are] not going to die' (p.158). Wedde reframes the gothic as a subset of the ironic, generic cultural resources available to self-aware postmodern individuals in confident globalised societies. He does not seem entirely convinced that there is anything particularly distinctive about an Enzed gothic, and you may not be either after making your own interpretive synthesis of this web-like project. Ultimately, however, *Gothic NZ* does provide a provocative, enjoyable, and in its own way, substantial, pause for thought.