

# Reinventing Australia

***Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity***

**By Catriona Elder**

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**Reviewed by Melissa Harper**

When Richard White wrote *Inventing Australia* in 1981 he noted that Australia, more so than many nations, had developed something of an obsession with defining its identity. It is a national obsession that has continued to flourish. With the challenges posed by more complex understandings of Australian history, the demands of Indigenous Australians to be fully recognised in contemporary Australian life, and ongoing concern about immigration levels and the relevance of multiculturalism, Australians are, more than ever, engaging in conversations about what it means to be Australian. Debates about Australian national identity continue to be the fodder of television current affairs, political discourse, coffee-table books and university courses.

Catriona Elder's *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* weighs into this familiar but complex terrain. Elder writes that her purpose is not to find the 'real' Australia nor the 'real' Australian but to examine how such ideas form and whose interests they serve. In doing so, Elder acknowledges her debt to White. As she rightly suggests, in the intervening 27 years since *Inventing Australia* first appeared, ideas of Australianness have been reshaped by a whole range of new events and issues and new theories have emerged to frame such discussions. The time to critically revisit and update the subject is thus long overdue.

Elder is largely concerned with twentieth-century Australia and she takes a thematic, rather than a chronological approach. Central to her methodology is the idea of stories—she analyses the ideas about Australian identity that are produced, reproduced, and also contested in the narratives we tell ourselves and others about what it means to be Australian. As she suggests, these narratives of identity are created in a number of domains: in political debate and government policy, in books, film, television, magazines and music, in exhibitions, street marches and sporting contests but also in everyday dialogue, from discussions in school classrooms and around the dining table to debates over a beer at the pub.

Elder draws easily and confidently on this diverse material and on a wide range of scholarship to weave together an impressive narrative of her own. *Being*

*Australian* is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with the particular ways that class, gender, sexuality, indigeneity and ethnicity have shaped stories of being Australian. A chapter is devoted to each but the strength here lies in the connections she draws between these factors both within and across the chapters. In the second half of the book the focus is on the places where national narratives are produced, whether in media texts, landscapes, public holidays, museums, the sporting field, on the streets or in everyday backyards. The obvious candidates make an appearance, including Anzac Day, the National Museum, Uluru and the Cronulla riots. Yet it is here that the book also analyses some less familiar, even surprising cultural phenomena for the contribution they have made to understandings of Australianness. In a chapter on the use of public space, Elder explores labour protests, Reclaim the Streets parties, Critical Mass, and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. She acknowledges that such events are not necessarily national in intent—they do not set out to tell a national story—but suggests that they nevertheless provide insights into how the nation works.

Just as *Being Australian* is concerned with the dominant narratives of Australian-ness and the ways that those stories are produced, Elder is also keen to examine contesting national narratives—the counter events, places and texts that suggest other ways of being Australian. This is perhaps the book's strength. Here Elder teases out the many areas of Australian life where the Anglo-Australian male, the 'Aussie bloke' that has for so long epitomised understandings of national identity, is challenged by an increasing awareness that Australian-ness is a complex and multifaceted beast.

The academic already well versed in historical and contemporary debates about Australian identity may not find anything particularly new here but for those looking for an engaging text for introductory courses in Australian Studies this promises to be a valuable addition to the classroom. Elder skilfully brings together a large amount of diverse material and for the most part the arguments are cogent and the writing accessible. At times the politics is a little too heavy-handed and this does run the risk of alienating an audience that (unfortunately) already feels that the teaching of Australian history has become an ideological exercise pandering to minority interests. But with its extensive use of popular culture references, its analysis of the 'serious' and the 'fun' places where stories of 'Australian-ness' are produced, and its acknowledgement of the genuine emotion that people attach to national identity, *Being Australian* also has the potential to re-engage 'Howard's children'. Hopefully it will encourage students of the need to think critically about the vested interests that so often shape stories of identity and belonging. One thing is certain: Elder's book won't be the last word on the subject.

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