The Sugarcane Novel: Questions of Genre and Region

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Writers of Australian farm novels typically use realism to depict southern wheat cropping and grazing, human farmers in control of the environment, manual labour, and Aboriginal characters at the margins of the narrative and farm life while perpetuating the profit-making motives of the settler-colonial worldview (Smyth, "Re-Imagining the Australian Farm Novel"). This approach leads to an under-representation of alternative types of agriculture and regions while neglecting nonhuman nature and the perspectives of people who are not settler-colonists or their descendants. How farming is conceived in the Australian imaginary is important when over sixty-one percent of Australia's land is used for grazing and farming (Simson), when the Australian Government aims to increase the gross value of agriculture (Littleproud), and when the world's human population is still growing (United Nations). The genre of the farm novel plays a role in constructing a dominant national imaginary. The farm novel is a novel that is set on a farm, has farming people as the main characters, and addresses farming issues (Meyer). Recent versions include Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2006), Jessica White's *Entitlement* (2012), Stephen Daisley's *Coming Rain* (2015), Stephen Orr's *The Hands* (2015), and Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015). These novels offer important insights into the many failures of farmers and farming, yet collectively maintain a national focus on wheat and grazing activities in southern regions of Australia. This southern view excludes types of agriculture confined to northern regions such as sugarcane, which is predominantly grown in Queensland; such a view is further constrained by a lack of diversity of writing styles and perspectives, which may simply be due to the relatively small number of known farm novels. Texts like Kim Scott's *Taboo* (2017) and Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019) serve as a tocsin, warning against an over-reliance on the traditional farm novel, by making the Indigenous worldview paramount. However, although these novels are set on farms, the degree to which they participate in the genre of the farm novel depends on the extent to which the main characters are farming people and the extent to which the text addresses farming issues. One could argue that Aboriginal sovereignty is a major farming issue, however, matters of sovereignty are not unique to farming. Challenging dominant notions of farming therefore requires a greater variety of literary experiences to stimulate new ways of thinking about interactions of farming, society, and the nonhuman.

Facilitating wider and deeper understandings of farmers and farming can be achieved in two ways. Firstly, by publishing a greater variety of farm novels to reshape the genre; and secondly, by creating new farming genres and modes that draw readers to consider additional texts. In this essay, I pursue the latter using John Frow's *Genre* (2006) as a guide, and similarly differentiate genre (as linked to form) from mode (as more like a theme). I argue that changing the core determinant of a farming genre or mode from a geographical area to a single farmed species dismantles a barrier to textual participation and modifies reader expectations such that richer understandings of farmers and farming can develop. To establish a manageable scope for this essay, I limit my discussion to texts related to one farmed species with the expectation that the ideas and concepts discussed may apply to any other categories linked to an individual species. Specifically, here, I examine narratives connected to the sugarcane plant (*Saccharum officinarum*) as I argue for the creation of a new genre of *the sugarcane novel* and a new mode of *sugarcane literature*. My proposed shift from a geographical core determinant to a single species also, I argue, has implications for conceptions of region. My aim is to disrupt the

common association of farming with historical issues and to stimulate demand for insights through fiction into contemporary farming activities and issues. In other words, to complement the dynamics of people and practices that bring new fiction into the world (Wilkins et al.) with a new lens through which to view literary representations of farming. This is not a matter of erasing the past, especially histories of colonisation and slavery, but of opening a door for the inclusion of texts that speak to other concerns.

An important aspect of genre is the way it can change with time and overlap with other genres. Russian prose scholar Viktor Shklovsky notes how a "new form makes its appearance to replace an old form that has outlived its artistic usefulness" (cited in Moretti 2452). Frow, like others before him including French philosopher Jacques Derrida, states that "genres are not fixed and pre-given" but are instead "performances of genre" that possess an "open-endedness of generic frames" (3). Sue Edney and Tess Somervell view genre as having "a literary tradition with an associated form" and distinguish mode as "a way of writing about a particular theme . . . that infiltrates and modifies other genres and forms" (7). Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher note that "[a]cademic debates over how a genre such as crime or fantasy or romance should be defined . . . can be lengthy and are themselves part of the process of genre formation" (18). These debates make apparent the need to review genres from time to time to determine their relevance, usefulness and function. They also suggest that given that a text can participate in any number of genres (Derrida), reshaping or creating new genres is possible. One example of overlapping genres relates to John Naish's farm novel *The Cruel Field* (1962). Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins describe Naish's novels as either "sugar country" or "canefields" novels (240). *The Cruel Field* also participates as an example of the georgic (Smyth "Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics"). Georgic literature, which is widely understood as evolving from Hesiod's *Works and Days* (700 BC) and Virgil's *Georgics* (29 BC), is essentially about "farm labour and husbandry, about growing crops and keeping animals" yet in a contemporary resurgence is explored to answer questions about how we "work to cultivate a fertile and sustainable relationship with our physical and social environment" (Erchinger et al. 1) or more urgently about "how we humans sustain the life of our planet" (Fairer xii). The georgic is variably regarded as either genre or mode (Edney and Somervell). Frow views mode as "the extensions of certain genres beyond specific and time-bound formal structures to a broader specification of 'tone'" (65). In this way, mode becomes more an adjective than a specific category. As such, Naish's novel could be read as a georgic comedy, should readers laugh at the alcohol-fuelled antics of the canecutter Mark Westcott who ultimately loses the money he had set out to earn at the start of the story. With these varied classifications in mind, what difference does it make for readers to encounter this text as a farm novel, georgic novel, sugar country novel, or canefields novel? And does any one genre or mode serve readers better than the others? Answering these questions requires a discussion of what genre means, how it is used, and its contemporary relevance.

I begin this discussion with a brief overview of why the farm novel was popular in the past and what matters to readers now. I then turn to how genre shapes texts and texts shape genre and look at overlapping genres and the ways in which texts inevitably participate in more than one genre, before addressing how texts shape region and the relationships between an evolving readership and genre. This essay does not reiterate a history of genre theory or add new permutations but rather offers an application of what is already widely known. At the same time, I maintain a focus on literature for a general audience connected to the sugarcane plant. This focus serves both my argument for establishing a new genre and mode and as a case study which may be relevant to future literary studies centred on specific nonhuman species or on region and regionalism. Further to this focus, my discussion addresses the sugarcane plant rather than the elements of the plant that become first a commodity and later ingredients in consumable products.

In the past, the farm novel was popular for reasons that are less apparent now. Roy Meyer, in his seminal text *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1965), attributes the popularity of the farm novel between 1920 and 1945 to economic conditions and "agrarian discontent" (182) and to a readership of "city dwellers who have known some early association with farm life and feel a certain amount of nostalgia for the scene of their youthful experiences" (184). In Australia, a pervasive representation of farming is an historical one with portrayals of agriculture involving mostly non-Indigenous men in frontier conditions that are either harsh or romanticised as "wholesome and restorative" (David Carter 146). This imagery coincides with a history in which many farmers have benefited from massacres, dispossession, and marginalisation of Aboriginal people and by exploiting indentured labourers and the nonhuman environment. Recent farm novels have made clear the injustices caused by past actions of pastoralists, plantation owners, and farmers. However, these kinds of portrayals fuel conflicts between urban and rural Australians—or "the city" and "the bush" (David Carter)—that arise from a mismatch in understandings. Tensions due to the disparity between ideals and harsh realities can be acute, especially when urban consumers constantly encounter "pictures of bucolic paradise" on the packaging of fresh food in supermarkets and in marketing campaigns for rural real estate and holiday retreats (Taylor et al. 96). The future of the farm novel—if it is to address this conflict—requires an honest acknowledgement of urban dependence and influences on agriculture while addressing contemporary concerns about Indigenous rights and human-nonhuman relationships. Understanding the capacity for an existing genre to accommodate new directions is key to determining whether a new genre is required and if so, how it could help meet the needs of future readers.

Shaping and Participation

The farm novel's traditional temporal settings and nation-building drive tend to lessen the genre's usefulness for contemporary readers. For example, a scarcity of farm novels set on sugarcane farms post-mid-twentieth century limits opportunities for insights into sugarcane farming after the 1960s transition to machine harvesting. Recent research by Kerry Boyne seeks to establish a subgenre of the "canecutter narrative" (57). Her research demonstrates a strong and continuing influence of historical settings and narratives on categorisations of literature that depict sugarcane and hence on understandings of sugarcane farming. John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), about the hardships involved in the 1951 manual harvest of sugarcane, could be either a canecutter narrative or farm novel. The extent to which this text modifies the farm novel genre in Australian literature is limited to Naish's more sensitive approach, relative to his peers, to representations of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander people. Within a wider collection of Australian farm novels, the text may be read as maintaining the nation-building and settler-colonial worldview pervasive in Australian literature prior to the mid-twentieth century (Smyth "Writing an Australian Farm Novel"). This creates a problem if genres act, as Frow states, to "create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the ways the world is understood" (2). Contemporary readers might be grateful that Naish, a Welsh migrant, sought to unveil the harsh conditions suffered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in rural Australia for the sake of nation-building. But this novel also represents what Frow describes as a "certain type of writing that requires a certain set of knowledges to understand" (7). Most likely it would appeal to the many labourers of the mid-twentieth century, as indicated by the blurb inside the cover that describes the book as "very much a man's novel, where courage and brutality coexist" (Naish i). Given that the early literature of North Queensland commonly reflects a male hegemony (Taylor and Perkins), Naish's novel does little to modify the genres that shaped it. The traditions embedded in farm novels set on sugarcane farms—or in a canecutter subgenre—are so well entrenched,

and there was a dearth of new versions for such a long period of time, I contend that the quickest path to addressing contemporary concerns is to reframe the reader's literary view of farming by creating a new genre—the sugarcane novel.

The singular worldview of the traditional farm novel and other related texts holds potential to negatively influence readers. Genres have a "structure of implication" that "sets up a certain complicity with the reader" (Frow 9). For example, Naish's readers are complicit in his storyworld, where women only work in bars or as nurses and mothers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are marginalised. Similarly, readers of Ronald McKie's town novel *The Crushing* (1977), a story set in a regional 1920s town where the residents are swindled by a family from the city, are complicit in a particular literary world, known for its absence of Indigenous characters (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"; Taylor). Both novels are connected to the sugarcane plant and are envisaged as participating in my proposed genre of the sugarcane novel: the former by its depictions of sugarcane; the latter by the inclusion of characters portrayed as sugarcane growers and millers. But this is not to say that my proposed genre must only include novels like those of Naish and McKie. Frow describes genre's work to "shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete" (10). This raises questions about the extent to which a writer must accept that shape. How many of the traits of a genre that shapes a text must be reproduced for it to remain an example of that genre? And how many of those traits must be subverted or challenged to enable the text to modify prior understandings of the genre? Without new versions, readers who engage solely with the Australian farm novel risk absorbing narrow worldviews. This stems from a relationship that Frow notes between the underlying knowledge used by the writer and that possessed by the reader. Hence, a definition of a specific genre that is easy to navigate and modify would allow writers to be more creative, and readers to consider a greater variation in literary offerings. Nevertheless, Alistair Fowler observes that genres are "positively resistant to definition" (40) and that definitions "can hardly be stated, before they are falsified" (42). For these reasons, I begin by requiring a mere mention of sugarcane for a text to participate in my proposed genre and mode.

Having a core determinant of the sugarcane plant for both genre and mode would draw into view a wider range of texts and thus help diversify notions of farming. For example, my proposed mode/theme of sugarcane literature would include texts by Faith Bandler and Louis Nowra as vital participants. Faith Bandler's *Wacvie* (1977) is a novelised biography of her father, Wacvie Mussingkon, who was kidnapped in 1883 from Ambrym Island in the New Hebrides to work as a slave on Australian sugarcane plantations. And Louis Nowra's play *Radiance* (1999) tells the story of three fictional Aboriginal women grappling with the injustices suffered by their mother/grandmother while living on a sugarcane farm, and the effects of those injustices on their own lives. Both Bandler's and Nowra's texts engage with different genres to those of Naish and therefore stimulate different sets of reader expectations. As a work of life writing, *Wacvie* may be understood as possessing greater veracity than fiction, and as a play *Radiance* would likely be expected to offer action and plot over access to the characters' hidden thoughts. Also, since both *Wacvie* and *Radiance* challenge the settler-colonial worldview that dominates the farm novels of Jean Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949) and John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (1963), they could be viewed as participants in South Seas or Blak writing (despite Nowra being non-Indigenous) and consequently produce different meanings. Furthermore, Bandler's *Wacvie* refers to a body of knowledge, that of the Ambrym Islanders, that in the 1800s was likely shared orally rather than textually. Frow points to the similarity of this process to that of intertextuality, where texts have relationships with other texts. Since *Radiance* especially would probably not be considered a georgic text (the main characters are not farming people), its inclusion in a sugarcane mode keeps this vital work in view.

One limit of my proposed genre and mode would occur when the word "sugarcane" is excluded. Many texts, like Ian Townsend's novel *Affection* (2005) about the 1900 outbreak of bubonic plague in Townsville, omit the word "sugarcane." Townsend's narrative, which is set in a farming region (where sugarcane dominates the abutting Burdekin district), offers insights into that region without contributing to understandings of the sugarcane plant. This work would be excluded from my proposed sugarcane novel genre. My proposed genre is envisaged as having four criteria: a mention of the word "sugarcane," explicit or implicit association of this word with the sugarcane plant, one or more insights into the influence of the plant on sugarcane-human or sugarcane-nonhuman relationships, and the form of the novel. For example, John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) includes the word sugarcane in "long walls of standing sugarcane" (13), associates this with the sugarcane plant in a description of "farms where planting was in progress" (13), and offers an insight into sugarcane-human relationships with "when the wet and wind got together, whole paddocks of cane fell lodged and twisted and rotting on the earth, twice as slow to harvest, twice as backbreaking" (15) in a text that takes the form of a novel. As Derrida explains in "The Law of Genre" "every text participates in one or several genres" (230). While *The Cruel Field* meets my criteria for the sugarcane novel, it is also a farm novel because of being set on a farm, and having main characters who are farming people, and addressing farming issues. It therefore participates in at least two genres. The criterion of the sugarcane novel that is most likely to attract the greatest interest of scholars is the *meaning* of sugarcane. Whatever this meaning will entail, it will involve a shift from the farm novel's primary focus on humans and land.

Creating a new genre to meet contemporary concerns about nonhuman nature involves shifting reader expectations and perspectives. While farm novels may be understood as books marketed to people interested in farming life, the sugarcane novel could be a book marketed to people interested in human relationships with plants. Genre is, after all, "shaped by a type of situation" (Frow 14). In the farm novel, readers may expect fictional representations of issues to do with farming, such as which crops to grow, how they are sown, when to harvest, how plants are fertilised and watered, where the labour comes from, why the farm creates its produce, how disease and erosion are controlled, who will manage the farm in the future, and who owns the land. Readers may also expect the text to contain prose and metaphors and literary devices such as a climax, denouement, and resolution. And almost certainly they will want to be entertained. However, once the text has done enough to support what Frow calls the "situation" of the genre, then it might reveal something about other genres, such as romance, or depart from expectations of the farm novel altogether. Indeed, planetary scale environmental issues are often addressed in extrapolative and speculative genres, such as climate fiction (Woods) and science fiction (Rosenberg). In any case, my proposed genre could help reframe the farm novel's "situation." The sugarcane novel would destabilise any assumptions that literary representations of farming are only for nostalgic farmers and only address farming issues. As Bandler's and Nowra's works demonstrate, depictions of sugarcane can have far wider implications.

Pondering which comes first, the genre or the text, is a fruitful exercise when engaging in the process of creating a new genre. Some creative writers first select a genre and then write strictly within its bounds (Wilkins et al.). Others write without much thought about the genre until they are asked (perhaps when submitting to a publisher) to nominate one. When delineating a new genre, ideally some texts that might relate to it already exist. This allows a demonstration of the types of texts that could reasonably engage with that genre. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope*, which "broadly speaking . . . refers to configurations of time-space that correspond to the world-views instantiated in fictions" (Cusack 266), prompts consideration of the world specific to the sugarcane novel. Would there need to be a description of a field of sugarcane? Would it contain dialogue about working on a

sugarcane farm? Or could the depiction of a memory of hiding in sugarcane suffice? Surely a genre with sugarcane as the core determinant can only suggest a world in which sugarcane plants exist. Each text in this genre could still participate in other genres, such as romance, crime, or farm novels, however, the increased number of participants in the sugarcane novel genre relative to the farm novel (due to my removing the need for a farm setting) would enable richer understandings of the plant's social and environmental influences. These understandings would grow even further by considering the diverse forms of the sugarcane *mode*, such as plays, poetry, and non-fiction. Drawing these texts together could facilitate understandings of the purposes and effects for which writers use representations of sugarcane. The mode of sugarcane literature is therefore an essential adjunct to the genre of the sugarcane novel.

However, some texts will offer more insights into plant-human or plant-nonhuman relationships than others. Within my broad assembly are texts that are more "relevantly similar," to use Frow's words, than others (24). Furthermore, and echoing Derrida's "law of impurity" (225), Frow writes that when defined by use, genre is "open-ended . . . unstable and unpredictable" (25). In other contexts, confusion can arise more often from undisclosed assumptions than from attempts at classification. While considering the provenance of texts, Caroline Levine draws attention to the way temporal and geographical boundaries are traditionally unstated, which can cause confusion and limit understandings of the varying influences on writers and their texts. A comparable mist of confusion blurs understandings of pastoral and georgic, which leads to the terms being used in different ways that lead readers to make assumptions about intended meanings (Pellicer; Smyth "Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics"). Again echoing Derrida, Frow writes that "[t]he law of genre is from the very beginning undermined by its lack of hold over the texts which it seems to regulate" (26). These issues do not negate genre criteria but emphasise a need for explicit reasoning on why a text participates in a certain genre, and an openness to that text participating in other genres.

Reader Expectations

For many readers, the word "sugarcane" will invoke meanings derived from other modes and genres. Non-fiction texts explain that the plant was introduced to Australia by settler-colonists and first milled for commercial sale of raw sugar in 1863 (Griggs). This commercialisation resulted in both conversion of pastoral land to cropping, and in clearing of lowland rainforests. In both instances, traditional owners were further dispossessed and marginalised. Cane growers quickly followed Australian cotton growers in exploiting people from a range of countries including the South Pacific Islands for the manual labour required to build their wealth (Roth). It is this knowledge that conveys, among other things in the sugarcane mode, understandings of the massive negative impact of sugarcane growing on Aboriginal people and thus gives power and significance to Louis Nowra's *Radiance* (1999). Nowra has no need to bring his cane grower, Harry Wells, onto the stage. It is enough for the main characters to mention this man, as the owner of the sugarcane farm on which their deceased mother/grandmother had lived, for the audience to draw on what they know of sugarcane from other texts. Similarly, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) draws on other texts, such as earlier novels and newspapers, to complete the depictions of hand-cutting sugarcane that the author omits. The audience of this play must imagine Barney Ibbot, Roo Webber, Johnnie Dowd and "the boys" or "our mob" as hard workers during the sugarcane harvest (72), since they are only seen at leisure in Melbourne during the "lay-off, five months of the year, December to April" between two annual harvesting seasons (55). Both plays examine the lives of people who do not control the happenings on the farm. For Nowra, Aboriginal women are negatively impacted; and for Lawler, an ageing canecutter (forty-one years old) suffers a loss of ability

and purpose. Both authors make powerful use of knowledge and meanings derived from non-fiction sources to contextualise their stories.

When comparing works, that one text might be less about sugarcane than another does not discredit my notions of the sugarcane novel genre and sugarcane mode so much as draw attention to the difficulties inherent in acts of classification. Alastair Fowler conceives a classification with indefinite boundaries as akin to a "family resemblance" (41–44), and Frow explains how a later work can use "pieces of the former, knowingly integrating them into its own construction" (49). One example from the expansive pool of the sugarcane novel is Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* (1936), which tells the story of Dulcie Lee, the wife of a canecutter, who becomes increasingly involved in a 1935 strike. The strike is about the risk to canecutters of Weil's disease, which can be fatal to humans and was commonly spread at that time by cutters being in contact with rat urine on unburnt cane. Devanny was an active orator for communist causes and devoted to the "reportage genre" (Ferrier, *Jean Devanny* 126), meaning she aligned her fiction as closely as possible to real life within a Western worldview. *Sugar Heaven* reads like newspaper reports of the early twentieth century and contains plenty of dialogue and narration that would suit the communist rallies Devanny attended. Indeed, *Sugar Heaven* so fully draws on communist oration and reports that the text "develops an extended argument about how the wives of strikers can become politicised" (Ferrier, Introduction vii). Based on Fowler's concept of "family resemblance" (41–44), Naish's and Devanny's farm novels might be read as siblings, and McKie's town novel as a second cousin, however all would be regarded as sugarcane novels.

Similarly, Karen Foxlee's *The Midnight Dress* (2013) makes use of earlier sugarcane texts but to a small degree. This novel, about the disappearance of Rose Lovell from a Queensland town, does not rely on a representation of a farm. Indeed, the reference to sugarcane in Foxlee's novel is principally through her depiction of a harvest festival. However, in line with Naish's *The Cruel Field*, this text conveys imagery of a rough rural community. This portrayal is a literary device used by the author to build a world in which acts of murder are both possible and likely. This atmosphere is later deployed in Maryrose Cuskelly's crime novel *The Cane* (2022). Irrespective of the degree to which these works participate in the sugarcane novel genre, they help develop understandings of the influence of sugarcane on regional societies (as fostering the presence of dangerous men) and offer representations and insights beyond those of Devanny's and Naish's novels. Similarly, when considering the sugarcane mode/theme, John Oakes's *Sugarflower: Memoirs of a Passionate Woman* (2001) might be considered almost unrelated. This biography of the author's grandmother depicts Lucy Beatrice Horn as an extraordinary gardener and shopkeeper, and a woman with greater independence and agency than many other women of her time. The text's connection to the sugarcane plant comes from Lucy's marriage to a man who managed a sugar mill, and her life in a small Queensland town, surrounded and influenced by sugarcane. This is not a direct connection between the subject of this biography and the sugarcane plant, and the text suggests little interest by the narrator in sugarcane. However, it does offer an understanding of the historical experiences of an influential woman in a small town that was dependent on commercial harvests of sugarcane.

Conceptions of Genre and Region

As a response to environmental concerns of readers in an era of ecological catastrophe, shifting attention from humans and land to a plant weakens anthropocentrism and the capitalist fixation on land ownership, which in turn expands conceptions of region. My contention is that, while each novel influences a reader's understanding of what a sugarcane novel could be, it also expands understandings of region by contributing to the multi-dimensionality of the

geographical regions where sugarcane grows. Paul Carter describes this multi-dimensionality as "creative assemblages" comprising "poetic cobwebs" or "crisscrossing tracks" (4–5). While this notion is useful to contemporary understandings of region, Carter's view of a "marginalised" region (5) is less so. A region is surely only marginalised if one accepts that the centre of life is elsewhere. From a plant's point of view, life usually begins and ends where its roots take hold. A small patch of soil is the centre of its world. Therefore, for sugarcane, the proposition that region is marginal becomes irrational, and instead deserts, oceans and cities would be conceived as regional. Furthermore, irrigation allows plants that depend on high rainfall to cross bioregional boundaries, plus sugarcane fields can be viewed similarly to Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's notion of the Western Australian wheatbelt as a temporal "event" witnessed by writers (Hughes-d'Aeth). So, region becomes locationally and temporally mutable according to perspective and circumstance. Also, regional literature could be entirely disconnected from the tangible properties of a geographical region. Rather than being "written by authors who were born" in the region or containing depictions of the region or being "explicitly set" in the region as Brigid Magner and Emily Potter have designated as defining features of "Mallee works" (Magner et al. 5), my proposed genre and mode could include works by authors with no direct connection to sugarcane regions, or works that are set outside the traditional region (such as Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*), and therefore draw heavily on the urban imagination of region. By removing a geographical area as a determinant, my genre and mode leans towards recognising the influence of a well-established plant that has engaged in relationships with many kinds of people and with many forms of nonhuman nature to the extent that numerous writers have sought to use this plant to reveal their emotions and ideas about what it represents. The region associated with my genre and mode consequently becomes an inseparable blend of time, place, and imagination in which the plant has a stronger presence than the contested land. This will enable a departure from anthropocentric classifications of literature, such as North Queensland "narratives of explorers, colonisers, castaways, frontier policemen, female pioneers, amateur and spurious ethnographers, white fringe-dwellers and exiles" (Mead 561). Such a shift in perspective will give a much-needed boost to the literary agency of plants and facilitate readings that challenge traditional anthropocentric conceptions of region.

Furthermore, my proposed genre and mode will contribute differently to critical regionalism by exploring plant-human relationships in different cultural contexts. As early Australian fiction was "both global and thoroughly local" (Bode), so too would be the sugarcane novel and mode. Connections could be made with literature of regions around the world where sugarcane grows, such as India and Brazil, where humans have—or have had—significant relationships with sugarcane. One might ask, for example, for what purpose or function is sugarcane used in the Trinidad setting of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), the Cuba setting of Virgil Suarez's *The Cutter* (1991), and the Louisiana setting of Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* (1992)? This juxtaposition of genre, mode, and location points to a need to examine urban and international interconnections with Australian regions and regional literature with a focus on plant interactions with humans.

My aim of understanding sugarcane-human relationships beyond the dominant historical settings of the Australian farm novel makes a highly inclusive family very useful. Especially so, given that the number of texts connected to sugarcane is not overwhelmingly large. One might ask, knowing of my aim to collate a wide variety of texts, why create a genre? Would only a mode suffice? To answer these questions, I turn to the georgic. Anthony Low views the georgic mode as "an informing spirit, an attitude toward life, and a set of themes and images rather than anything so definite, say, as a four-book didactic poem of two thousand lines on the subject of agriculture" (7). The georgic has reached far beyond its early generic form and era over many centuries. As Frow points out, the transition from genre to mode is

evident when the genre "over time take[s] on a more general force" (65). However, the transition of the georgic genre to mode is not universally accepted. Many scholars disagree with Low and consider the georgic has remained a genre. This difference in understandings cannot be resolved in this essay but is mentioned because it raises a question about whether sugarcane literature can be viewed as a mode. Is sugarcane literature a "general force" as Frow suggests mode is? Can sugarcane be an adjective used to describe genres? For example, the sugarcane farm novel or the sugarcane crime novel. Or is it a "theoretical genre . . . in the process of becoming"? (Frow 69–70). Perhaps in future other traits will emerge to solidify my proposed genre and mode. For now, these new constructions offer an opportunity to boost awareness of plant-human and plant-nonhuman relationships in fiction and hence deliver wider and deeper understandings of farmers and the many agents involved in farming.

Implications and Relevance

This alignment of the significance of the sugarcane novel and sugarcane mode with recent and emerging environmental concerns distinguishes my proposed classifications from the Australian farm novel and ensures the sugarcane novel's relevance for contemporary readers, both urban and rural. Let us suppose for a moment that the sugarcane novel has a greater significance than any one novel that uses the word "sugarcane." Suppose the sugarcane novel is a printed book offered for sale in bookshops with a narration of some kind that may or may not be set on a farm, and the details of the sugarcane plant seem authentic, as if the narrator or characters have encountered this plant first-hand. What then are the "kinds of action, the kinds of actors who perform them, and the significance that accrues to [these] actions and actors" (Frow 76)? In farm novels, human actors work against social and environmental challenges to grow a healthy crop of sugarcane. In crime novels, human actors work against social and environmental challenges to achieve social justice. At times, the significance of one genre is also found in another. For example, the human characters of Maryrose Cuskelly's *The Cane* (2022) want to grow a crop of sugarcane *and* discover who murdered Janet McClymont. My proposed sugarcane novel will primarily shed light on a plant's agency and co-existence with humans and other species, which aligns with contemporary concerns about how humans can live more respectfully with the nonhuman environment.

Additionally, a body of knowledge specific to this genre will underpin the significance of human and nonhuman relationships with sugarcane. For Frow, "[g]enre is a framework for processing information and for allowing us to move between knowledge given directly in a text and other sets of knowledge that are relevant to understanding it" (80). For example, as Frow explains, the crime novel relies on knowledge about the usual actions and impacts resulting from a crime, the need to involve the police and give interviews and find witnesses and evidence that will be useful in a court of law plus an appreciation of the social prejudices and accusations that can occur due to miscommunication and human errors. All this knowledge, which is essential when reading the crime novel, is not essential when reading the farm novel. The knowledge specific to the farm novel genre, as mentioned earlier, is about farming issues. Similarly, novels set in towns depend on knowledge of urban environments with their streets and shops and public utilities and councils and community groups and venues and events for social interactions. So, what would be a commensurate body of knowledge underlying the sugarcane novel? Perhaps it would incorporate elements such as the following. The sugarcane plant is a grass that produces and stores sucrose. It is associated with a history of racism, whereby Indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their lands and marginalised, and slave labour was used in the cane fields. The plant offered a way for migrants to earn a living, especially displaced persons who migrated from Europe to cane growing regions after World War II. This era of hand-cutting sugarcane involved large numbers of mostly men working in

the cane fields to harvest a plant that has for centuries been valued by humans as a source of sugar. Some people may also understand sugarcane as symbolic of specific regions where sugarcane grows. Most novels that mention sugarcane make use of this knowledge.

What is widely known about the history of sugarcane contextualises sugarcane texts for both the writers and their readers. Cuskelly's *The Cane*, Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* and Naish's *The Cruel Field* point to and contribute to racial prejudice against Indigenous people through the reader's complicity in the world created. The dominance of male labour in the fields is portrayed in Eric Baume's *Burnt Sugar* (1938), which tells the story of a man escaping the violent world of the cane fields to work elsewhere as an accountant. Baume's rough male hegemony is later conveyed through Naish's *The Cruel Field*, if only as a way for Naish to reveal its limits (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"), and Naish's *That Men Should Fear* depicts a woman, Mary Vaughan, conquering the male domain by choosing to manage the family farm without relinquishing that role to a man through marriage. This subversion of male privilege echoes Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields*, where a woman escapes her position as a maid to manage a sugarcane plantation, and is reinforced in a mid-twentieth century setting in Alli Sinclair's *Burning Fields* (2018), which also depicts a woman managing a sugarcane farm. Genre "specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context" and makes some meanings "more probable, in the circumstances, than others" (Frow 101). An association of masculinity with the farm novel enables readers to recognise the importance of subversive narratives, such as those in which women are the farmers. Such casting reshapes the farm novel but would not necessarily reshape my proposed sugarcane novel, which would have many more participating texts.

Genre and Readers

The validity of the sugarcane novel as a genre may depend on interpretations by its readers and an awareness of cultural change. Frow asserts that genre is "a function of reading" rather than a "*property* of a text" (102, italics in original). It follows that interpretations are highly likely to differ and change with time. For example, at the time of its first publication, Ronald McKie's *The Crushing* (1977) may have been understood as reflecting 1970s culture and values, despite its 1920s setting. After more than forty years of social changes, it becomes impossible to re-create a 1970s reading. But presumably a 1970s reader, surrounded by texts prepared by and for people who shared Australia's dominant settler-colonial worldview, would focus on different aspects of the story than readers would today. Indeed, a review by Adrian Mitchell published in 1978 attends to characterisation, a narrator with "no real part in the novel" and "precious writing, where mannerism not only intrudes but in fact takes over" (75–76), whereas in 2023 the novel is read as reinforcing old notions of nation-building with overtones of environmental recklessness and a society dominated by non-Indigenous men (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). In the 1970s, when the history of sugarcane farming was conceived in nation-building terms, this text would not have been assigned to a sugarcane genre like the one I propose in this essay. It is more likely to have participated in an anthropocentric genre of literature along the lines of Thea Astley's description of a "Queensland environment" marked by "isolation" and "manners indifferent, laconic" (252–54). How Astley defined Queensland in her 1976 scholarly writing offers useful insights into Queensland's literary history but is less attuned, simply due to the global context at the time, to the exacerbated environmental crisis of the twenty-first century. As Frow contends, genre "defines a set of expectations" (104), and new sets of expectations must be prepared by and for contemporary readers. However, this may be easier said than done. Emily Potter points to a diversity of contemporary reader expectations and receptions of texts that leads to disagreement about what constitutes "Mallee works" (Magner et al. 5). Nevertheless, rather than Astley's adventures

into an isolated society, readers of regional literature during an era of eco-crisis will increasingly demand insights into human relationships with nonhuman nature, especially since the regions are where most nonhuman nature remains.

Conclusion

My proposed sugarcane novel genre and sugarcane literature mode/theme, both of which have the sugarcane plant as the core determinant, are envisaged as highly inclusive. They hold potential to shift the literary gaze away from a focus on humans and land and towards texts that address contemporary concerns by recognising the agency of plants, through both human and nonhuman relationships with sugarcane. That texts rely on readers to draw on a body of knowledge supports my proposal for a new "family" of literature that centres a single nonhuman species and makes use of its complex history, processes of cultivation, and the specific regions where it grows. This alternative to the farm novel and sugar country or canefields novel has implications for comparative literary studies and critical regionalism, since nonhuman species aided by modern technologies can cross the bioregional, geomorphological, and climatic boundaries that are increasingly employed in literary histories. Furthermore, a plant-centred perspective subverts the notion of regions as marginal and prompts locationally and temporally mutable conceptions of region. Importantly, my proposed new genre and mode enables literature written and set thousands of kilometres from cane fields to participate. Hence, the ways in which texts participate in a region begin to resemble the multifarious ways that texts participate in genre.

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