Stories of the Past, Stories for the Future: An Interview with Philip Mead

In 2008, the University of Western Australia won the Federal Government tender to host the new National Chair of Australian Literature, with Philip Mead, a distinguished and long-serving professor from the University of Tasmania, given the appointment. In 2009 Winthrop Professor Mead (also the Associate Dean of Research for the UWA Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) took up the position while also publishing his critically acclaimed study Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry with Australian Scholarly Publishing. Professor Mead spoke to Ruth Morgan and Brooke Dunnell about the role of the Chair, his personal research interests, and the future of Australian literary studies.

After this interview was conducted it was announced that Networked Language had won the NSW Premier’s Prize for Literary Scholarship. The Limina collective congratulates Professor Mead on this amazing achievement.

RM: You came to The University of Western Australia last year after a distinguished career at the University of Tasmania, and during your career you’ve also been associated with poetry, writing, journals and book editing. Your most recent work has been showered with praise: Networked Language has been described by Westerly as “at once a real pleasure to read and an intellectually prevaricating study of Australia’s culture of letters”, and by Southerly as a work “that offers so much significant new information and so many new angles of vision in so many areas.”

Tell us how you came to be sitting here today.

PM: The opportunity came up for this new Chair at UWA and I threw my hat in the ring. As it turned out I got the job! I thought it was the ideal job in the world for me and it’s proving to be that.

But it wasn’t as though I’d planned to get here. I’d done my undergraduate degree at ANU back in the seventies. At that point there wasn’t any Australian literature studied at that university – there was just before and just after, but I happened to be there at a time when Australian literature wasn’t taught. But at that time there were a lot of writers living in Canberra: A.D. Hope was still alive and had taught in the English department. In fact, he taught me at one point, though not Australian literature – he taught eighteenth-century literature. There was Judith Wright, Roger McDonald, David Campbell, Dorothy Green (an important influence), and Rosemary Dobson, and probably two or three others who lived in that area and who participated in life at ANU. Somehow or other, undergraduates like me, who were interested in Australian writing, were able to meet these people. We put on readings, and we started up a small literary journal, and we got to know them and they got to know us. It was as if I had two universities: English at the ANU then was a relatively old-fashioned course, including medieval and modern, and language and literature – even though it was conservative, it was very good training – and teachers like Wes Milgate, Ian Donaldson and Bob Brissenden all had significant
commitments to Australian literature. Even Sam Golberg, known to us as an ‘inner circle Leavisite’ and who taught me in my Honours year, had an interest in contemporary Australian writing. One of the very few books on his bookshelf was the *Collected Poems of Judith Wright*. But I also had this other university, much less formal, of a community of writers that I went to. I knew from the beginning that I was interested in Australian literature and I remain so, although as you can see, it’s always been in relation to other national and mainstream English studies.

After doing Honours there, I went to La Trobe University, where I did an M.A. Although I knew that I was going to work in Australian literature somehow, I got involved again in magazines and writers’ communities in Melbourne. In the late seventies there was still a lot of interest in American literature and I actually did an M.A. in modern American poetry. This was because in the poetic world in which I was moving, the American connection was very important. It was where the energy was and there was a sense that if you wanted to go to the source you’d do that. Also, I had gone to high school in the US, for grades 11 and 12, to Walt Whitman High School, no less, in Bethesda, Maryland! So I had a connection to US literary culture which I’ve never really lost. By the end of my M.A., I’d been at university as a student for a long time, more than six years, and I thought I’d better do something else. So I went and did all sorts of other jobs: I drove cabs, worked for wine companies, went school teaching for a few years down in Geelong.

I drifted back into universities in the early 80s because I happened to be living in Geelong, not far from Deakin University, which hadn’t been going that long. A colleague, Ian Reid, who’s at this university now, was working there at the time and I started tutoring for him. We had many interests in common, not the least of which was American literature. Then I thought I’d better get serious so I started doing a PhD about Australian literature at Melbourne University. Back in Melbourne I got involved in *Meanjin*, where I was poetry editor for seven years or so. It was a very lively time, both at the journal and at the University of Melbourne. I was lucky enough to get a position in the English Department there, the Lockie Fellow in Creative Writing and Australian Literature, which was a unique position in that English department. It had originally been held by Vincent Buckley and by other Australian critics and writers before me. It was a junior lectureship job, at least at first, and there was a lot of teaching to do. It’s not as though it was just sitting there writing and researching; it was a ‘do everything’ sort of job. But it allowed me to renew that interest in Australian writing and to do a serious bit of critical work on my thesis. The thesis was about lots of different kinds of Australian writing, but including poetry. It was after that, I decided I wanted to write a book about poetry.

In the mid-90s a job came up at the University of Tasmania. I’d been at Melbourne University for seven or eight years and it was about to go into a different phase. I also went to Tasmania for personal reasons – our daughter was five years old and we thought it would be a good place for her to grow up. I did a lot of work over those years in terms of teaching literary, cultural and theoretical studies, developing courses, revising courses, and so on. I was overall Co-ordinator of English, Associate Academic Dean, Honours Coordinator, Postgraduate Coordinator, I co-ordinated first year – I did every job over that period of time. I found that very interesting, and I developed a sequence of Australian literature courses. I did a lot of Honours and postgraduate supervision. Later, I wrote this book [*Networked Language*] and published it not that long before I came here. I also worked on journals. For example I’m on the editorial board of *Australian Literary Studies* and *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and I was co-editor of *JASAL: The Journal of the Association of the*
Study of Australian Literature. This was a new journal in 2002 and I was one of the people who helped to get it started. I was co-editor for a couple of years. All this wasn’t high-profile academic work but I liked it and I think it’s important.

Then, on a completely different track, there was a sense a couple of years ago that Australian literature was suffering at schools and at universities. There was a beat-up in the press about it, particularly in the Murdoch press, that the study of literature in our own country was declining.

RM: What do you think triggered that?

PM: It was the retirement of Liz Webby and Peter Pierce. At that point there was only one Chair of Australian Literature in the country. This was at Sydney University, the one initially held by Leonie Kramer in the 60s. Then it was held by Liz Webby before she retired in 2007. Peter Pierce retired from James Cook University around the same time. He had been a Chair of Australian Literature there but James Cook University decided not to keep that Chair going. Journalists got a hold of that and decided that there was a crisis, which there wasn’t really, just generational change. In fact there were a number of other senior people in literary studies around the country who had substantial involvement in Australian literature teaching and research. But the Literature Board of the Australia Council called a roundtable and there were various people there including the Minister for Education at the time, Julie Bishop. I had nothing to do with this, I wasn’t at the roundtable, but I knew about it from the papers. Out of that roundtable meeting at the National Library came a number of suggestions, including one for another Chair of Australian Literature. Then the Government changed. But one of the first things Julia Gillard said was, ‘Yes, we’re backing that, it’s a great idea’. All the universities in Australia were invited to bid for a federally funded Chair in Australian Literature. Of the ten or twelve who put in bids, The University of Western Australia won. Their bid was successful largely because Australian literature’s always been strong here. It’s good that UWA got it too because there’s still only one other Chair in the country and that’s the one at Sydney. There was a sense in which – and that’s become part of my job – a hub for the study of Australian literature needed to be built up in the west; there’s already a strong representation in Sydney but let’s see if we can make it a truly national thing.

BD: Is there any difference in focus? Do you see your position here as being different from Sydney, or complementary to Sydney, or the same as Sydney or anything like that?

PM: That’s a good question and it’s one I’m thinking about quite a lot. I’ve found the actual document that UWA put in for the bid to be very useful because it provides a history of the study of Australian literature at UWA. It helps me to think about what I want to do. I also know the Chair of Australian Literature at Sydney, Rob Dixon, and we work together on projects. So it’s not about competition. Sydney are doing lots of good things. It has the largest English department in the country and it’s very strong in medieval, Renaissance, eighteenth-century, and it has a tradition of that Chair of Australian Literature that goes back nearly half a century. Rob Dixon is doing things in terms of research and internally in terms of coursework that are very valuable; setting directions. Sydney has a focus on developments within the e-Humanities – quantitative research projects in literary studies. With a younger scholar, Katherine Bode, he has just published a collection called Resourceful Reading, which I have a
small contribution to. It’s about empirically based research in literary studies. In other words, the use of compilations of data, often large data sets, to analyse bibliographical records, publishing and industry information etc, to see what they tell us about reading, publishing, publishing history, book history, those sorts of areas. These are some of the directions in which literary studies is going internationally.

So the question is then what can we do here that’s equally connected to international trends and developments but that’s also distinctive. I’m still thinking about this, but one of the things I have done since I got here is to publish a couple of things about the importance of region and locale. One of the things that has been important here in literary studies, criticism and writing, has been a strong sense of the region, ‘the West’ and what its characteristics are. That was something I was always interested in because I lived in Tasmania for so long. Tasmanians have a very strong sense of a distinctive geography and history, which is reflected in their literature. I taught a course called ‘Literature of Tasmania’, which no one had ever done before. It was easy because there was such a wealth of material and the students, both local and international, found is fascinating. The romance of islands! I’m not sure whether it’s a good idea to develop a course in West Australian literature because it’s a different time and a different situation. But I am thinking about how literary knowledges relate to and shaped by locale and regions. John Kinsella has written influentially about this. And some of my colleagues here are already doing important work – Kim Scott’s investigations into the language of Indigenous-settler contact, the literary history of the wheat belt – for example, that I need to learn from. A paper I gave at the Modern Languages Association at the end of last year was about Australian uses of English in relation to global forms of English in connection with poetry, about the way we hear the Australian accent here and overseas. So those are the sorts of things I’m thinking about at the moment. These can lead on to thinking about what kind of courses you could teach, what kind of research projects you might think up, what kind of editing projects are worth doing – all those things could be influenced by the idea of knowledges as both local and global.

I have an interest in world literature, and in trans-cultural criticism. One of the papers I gave in Berlin was about transnational criticism: criticism that looks at Australian literature in relation to other national forms. One fascinating instance here is Christina Stead, who wrote the great novel The Man Who Loved Children. She was an expatriate Australian writer for most of her life; she left when she was quite young and lived in Europe, the UK and the US for most of her adult life. She only came back here after her husband died, living in Canberra until well into her eighties. She is probably one of the less well recognised Australian writers overseas, but there’s no doubt that she is one of the strongest writers we’ve ever produced. Her career though is interesting – it’s suffered from her moving around so she didn’t have the kind of settled connections with literary communities that produces more successful careers. She was also associated with Left politics in a way that meant that she didn’t receive the critical attention she might have. Part of the story is what the radical nationalists in Australia like Miles Franklin, said: ‘She’s not really Australian, she left, we don’t consider her an Australian writer’. H.M. Green, who wrote the two-volume History of Australian Literature, our first major literary history, gave one sentence to her where he basically said the same thing. So you can see how she was not considered an Australian writer in the fifties and sixties. But what’s happened in the last couple of years – this is an example of trans-cultural criticism – is that critics have gone back to her work and said, ‘Oh hang on, this is really interesting – this novel’s set in England, this one’s set in Australia, there’s this reception, she gets reviews in France and
England and back in Australia as well, let’s look at her as an intellectual and writer who traverses different national contexts and times.’ How do we read the life and work? Rather than having to think about writers in terms of limited and exclusively national categories – you’re Australian or you’re not, you’re American or not – those ways of looking at literature seem to have less traction than they used to.

So if we don’t have to think of the region of Western Australia in terms of being part of a nation, as part of ‘Australia’ even. I mean it’s a locale, it’s a place, it’s distinctive, but maybe we can think about it in terms of how knowledges happen here and elsewhere in the globe. That’s what I meant by local and global, metropolitan and regional. So you can leave behind the ‘national’ anxiety about ‘We’re in the west, we’re ignored, we’re isolated’. I don’t feel that sense of isolation but I can understand why people do. On the other hand I lived on an island for ten years, where I didn’t feel isolated although you felt literally insular. In WA there’s that sense of closeness to Asia and at the same time, we feel like the Occidental Province (to quote Conrad). You can understand that, but how does that work in terms of people’s attitudes towards Asia and the Indian Ocean – which way do you look? Do you look west across the Indian Ocean, or east? So that’s a fairly random spray of stuff, but you can see what it means, I’m thinking about place and locale and being here.

RM: With the Chair specifically, what are your formal and informal roles here? How do you fit in?

This is the first nationally funded Chair in Australian Literature so I don’t have any models. That’s one of the fascinating and slightly scary aspects to it – I’ve got to do it from the start. That’s also very exciting. That being said, I’ve obviously got to make sure we build on that existing variety and strength in Australian literature within the English area, within the faculty. We need to attract postgraduates here.

At the moment I’m thinking about it in terms of teaching because I happen to have done a survey and a report about the teaching of Australian literature in the past couple of years. That work will create some interest, I think, because of the national curriculum, which will include the study of Australian literature. This survey was prompted by the question ‘is the teaching of Australian literature suffering?’ And I thought, ‘Okay, let’s find out exactly what the story is’. So the report is a snapshot of what’s been taught in the last couple of years. As we’re moving towards the national curriculum – the English Teachers’ Associations are heavily involved in this – there will be a lot of interest in that mid this year and later, and I’d like to contribute to that in various ways. The national curriculum and debates about that will be one way in which I can be part of the national conversation about English and Australian literature from here.

I’m also editing a volume with a Professor of Education at Deakin University and a colleague from the Education Department at Melbourne University. It’s about the teaching of Australian literature across the secondary and tertiary sectors. We want to encourage communication between the two sectors because they’ve grown apart in terms of the framing of English curricula. History teachers have a lot more communication and sharing of curriculum work and research conferences between the tertiary and secondary levels, which we haven’t been quite so good at in English and literary studies.
BD: It seems to be a good idea to have this general position they put you in where you decide what needs to be done, as opposed to the Government saying ‘We need this done, and this done’ and you get here and say, ‘No, actually we don’t’.

PM: Yes, that’s right, there’s no sense of that. I think the main thing for me is also getting a feel for UWA, because that’s new to me. Although I was a student at ANU and at La Trobe, and I’ve worked at Deakin, Melbourne and the University of Tasmania, and I’ve experienced a number of other universities, UWA is new to me. It’s really a modern place to work, in lots of ways. It’s a really good university, fantastic governance, a Vice-Chancellor who’s outstanding in every possible way, as everyone recognises. It’s such a valuable time here, you feel as though you want this to go on for as long as it can.

BD: Just on that, there seems to be very UWA-focused and WA-focused little explosions of success in literature at the moment, with Dennis Haskell being named the head of the Australia Council’s Literature Board, and your future work with John Kinsella and so on. What you would say about the state of WA writing and scholarship at the moment?

PM: That’s right, it feels like the Chair is just part of a moment that’s exciting. I don’t think necessarily these things are planned, they just happen. I mean obviously the Chair was planned and carefully thought about and so on, but the fact that it happens to coincide with other interesting developments is chance.

I haven’t had time to get involved in the local writing community as much as I would like. Not in the way that I was involved in communities in Melbourne and Tasmania. On the other hand, I probably know and have met many of the writers anyway from general involvement in the national scene over a long period of time. I mean, I knew Dennis [Haskell], I knew John [Kinsella], I knew Gail Jones, Lucy Dougan slightly, and so on, so it [the WA literary scene] was no surprise to me. Tim Winton talked to one of my classes at Melbourne University years ago. But I’m looking forward to getting involved in the local scene in a way that I haven’t yet had a chance to. For me what that’s going to involve is doing a lot of reading, getting to know the history and the archive and talking to the people who knew the writers or who have indeed written about the culture and have been producing the magazines.

BD: Living in WA, we often seem to have a culture of strong belief in our Arts scenes, with the impression that ‘Oh the WA music scene is so great, the WA writing scene is so great’. I just wonder how it’s perceived from outside, from say Tasmania or Victoria, and whether this almost provincial way of thinking – I’m not saying it’s not great – but is it kind of a protection thing, or a part of that sense of isolation that you referred to before? How do you see it as someone who has moved here and is now part of it?

PM: Well, it varies. I didn’t think of it as very different in some ways. It has similarities with Tasmania, where you have a rich history, you have a mixture of internationally known writers, say Tim Winton and Richard Flanagan, and a rich history of other well known writers who’ve come from here. There’s also extremely lively little magazine cultures but no major publisher. Most of the major publishing in Australia is in Sydney and Melbourne. There’s some independent presses, here obviously Fremantle and so on, Wakefield in Adelaide, UQP [in Queensland]. I
thought of [WA] as another part of Australia with this distinctive kind of mix, but without that heavy density that you get in Melbourne and Sydney.

As a literary scholar I also knew that WA had been one of the most important states in terms of defining itself. That’s important. In other words there had been a lot of publishing about the West in the literary critical field, bibliographical work coming out of this university, critical work, editing work, journals. WA was known as a place that had defined itself, certainly more than Tasmania. Oddly there was less of that in Tasmania. Tasmanians do have a strong sense of their own distinctiveness but they actually haven’t done the cultural work that West Australians have. Why, I’m not sure – perhaps because [West Australians] feel isolated, because they feel more strongly they need to define themselves.

**RM:** Touching back on locale and regionalism and WA’s sense of isolation in the western third. We’ve mentioned Asia – do you think it has an influence on your role as a national Chair situated on the west coast? Can you elaborate on the relationship between WA’s geographic position and the Chair?

**PM:** Yes, but not yet very much because one of the first things I did was to go to Berlin for four months, which I was committed to doing before I got the job here. It turned out to be a good thing because I could go there as a UWA person, and that was good for me, but also for UWA in terms of connections. You go to the West and you think the connections are going to be with Asia and they turn out to be initially with Europe! One of the things that’s driving that is a significant interest in Australia in Germany. Students there are very interested in Australian literature, which is what I was teaching there, and in coming to Australia. For school leavers in Germany, Australia is the number one desirable destination.

On the other hand, just in the short time I have been here, my daily work is often with what’s going to be Indian Ocean and Asian connections. We’re part of a network with two Chinese universities, and Dennis [Haskell] has significant connections over a long time with Asian writing, as well as formal connections with teaching in Hong Kong. And so Asian connections are part of the history here. I’ve yet to learn about those, and I said that in my interview, that’s one thing I’ve had little experience of, living in Tasmania and Melbourne. I’ve had connections with the US and with Europe to some extent, but never so much with Asia. I think there’s possibilities there, probably mostly to do with the more academic side of the job: exchanges, courses, teaching, supervisions, etc.

**BD:** We were wondering if you might outline for us what you are working on separate from these university projects?

**PM:** My personal research projects?

**BD:** Yes, I remember you saying one was about Australian literature and the world and one was about Australian literature and the underground, so I was just wondering if you might tell us about those and anything else that you’re doing at the moment.

**PM:** One project I’m working on is a set of connected essays about Australian literature and the world. It explores thinking about a literature post-nationally. For example, what kind of connections were there between Modernism in Europe and
Aboriginal culture in the early twentieth century? What kind of writers came to Australia at different periods of time, like D.H. Lawrence and Georges Perec? What kind of connections did they have with Australian writers? What kind of expatriate experience was there? In other words, looking at Australian literature through various facets that are not defined rigidly by the national, and to suggest that there have always been connections between writing in Australia and elsewhere.

I’m also beginning an ARC Discovery project about monumentalising Shakespeare. It’s a collaboration with a colleague at King’s College London. It’s about two monuments – the National Theatre in London and the Sydney Shakespeare Monument, outside the Mitchell Library. They’re both generated by 1916: they don’t happen till later for various interesting reasons, but 1916 is the tercentenary of Shakespeare’s death. All around the world there were celebrations of one kind or another, and in London and in Sydney there was a desire to have a monument to Shakespeare. It’s a Cultural Studies project because monuments tell you a lot about a culture, how they get decided on, how they get built, where they get built, how they get designed, and so on. Our idea is to take two monuments and to tell the story of how they represent two societies’ changing views of Shakespeare across hemispheres. There hasn’t been very much done on the Sydney Shakespeare monument. This is actually a longstanding interest of mine, Shakespearean institutions in Australia, as I call it – the way Shakespeare’s been taught, read, understood here in Australia. It’s an important part of our cultural and literary heritage. When you go back to 1916 you see the desire to reaffirm connections with England, and this is done through Shakespeare. That peters out as Australia gets a stronger sense of its own identity, and as involvement in the First World War takes over as a defining event in national history. Actually, Shakespeare memorialisation and Anzac are entangled together from the beginning. Then why is Bell Shakespeare so successful? It’s the only independent theatre company in the country, and it’s only successful because it’s Shakespeare, any other independent theatre company probably wouldn’t survive. What kind of traditions and heritage is that continuing? I think it goes back to something about that statue. It’s also a fun project because we’ll broaden it out in the third year into talking about Shakespearean monuments elsewhere. There’s all sorts of Shakespearean monuments around the world with interesting local histories and contexts. We aim to have a conference, to talk about other Shakespeare monuments. For example there’s one in Weimar in Germany. Weimar as you know was the capital of Germany between Versailles and when Hitler took over, and Weimar was the great cultural capital of Germany, in Thuringia, where Goethe and Schiller lived, Bach before that; a great cultural centre, and there’s a Shakespeare monument there. There’s evidence about how the Germans thought that Shakespeare was theirs, that he belonged to them. So how does that happen, is the interesting cultural question.

RM: Great! Are there any more projects?

PM: Probably the one I’m most absorbed by is a project about literature and the ‘underground’. What I would like to explore are the relations between literature and the sources of wealth in our culture. Sources of wealth like mining, for example. That’s not something people think is at all relevant. And so I was having a look at the history of the university. It goes back to the Goldfields in a way because the money that’s made out of newspapers by Hackett is related to newspapers generally in WA and their history and newspapers on the goldfields and so on. He makes a fortune out of that and is able later to endow the university. That’s just one little story: the way in
which institutions are created from individual wealth, or company wealth of one kind or another, and then produce cultural effects. In Australia we tend not to talk about this much. We don’t think about it in the way that Americans do; Americans are quite upfront about the way in which wealthy individuals endow institutions and support cultural activities of one kind or another. In other words, there’s a kind of aspect of capitalism there that is much more obvious than with us. We tend to occlude the links between institutions and sources of wealth. As far as most of us are concerned, it’s just government funding to support universities, that’s all there is to it. This is vague and general at the moment, but I think there’s a lot of literature about things that generate wealth, like mining, and farming. And of course one of the things that novels have always been about, since Robinson Crusoe, and the first sentence of Pride and Prejudice, has been household and interpersonal economics: marriage, inheritance, rent, money, etc, the central themes of fiction. The strange thing is that there’s so little ‘literature’ about commerce and business at the broader social level; or perhaps it’s not! It’s sounding more dubious as I talk about it but I think I can make it relevant and interesting!

On another track, if you go back to the slightly later German Romantic material, there’s a lot of writing about mines and mining. It’s allegorical of digging for meaning, looking for meaning underneath – the strange, disturbingly anti-cultural fact that wealth comes out of the ground, from the dirt. And it’s also sometimes about work, whether people have to work with their hands or not. Further back, in the English Renaissance, it’s also there in the Sidney and Dudley families, for example, in the wealth behind Penshurst; it’s what Jonson’s poem was designed (in every sense of that word) to obscure. And there’s a lot of Australian novels about mining. In WA we have Gavin Casey, for example, who was born on the goldfields and wrote a number of novels about mining, as did Katherine Susannah Prichard. The classic Australian novel The Fortunes of Richard Mahony begins with miners on Ballarat. The first scene of Richard Mahony, a very sombre beginning for a defining Australian novel, is of a man being buried alive in a mineshaft. It’s actually about the rape of the earth, too, a theme with special relevance for us today perhaps. So I think probably it’s a matter of how to write that book without it sounding too eccentric.

RM: We talked a little bit about your interest in locale and space, but what about context? That’s something that seems to come up, historicising and finding. Say, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, all the things that go into that book you seem to be emphasising that a fair bit in what you’ve been talking about. Is that done enough, is that something you’re hoping to focus on more?

PM: That’s the sort of critic I am, I’m an historicist critic. In other words it’s about how the past is present and how literary texts were influenced and marked by their social and historical context then. But of course we don’t have unmediated access to then, so how do we understand the past through literary texts? It’s not a simple thing, it’s not as simple as historicism anymore. It’s not even kind of a New Historicism, which was an influential development in the literary critical field. Certainly I was heavily influenced by that when I was writing my thesis, but that was fifteen years ago. My book Networked Language is about the way in which literary texts are embedded in the social and cultural contexts that produce them but then that’s all shifting forward. You don’t read that in a kind of static way. I use the word ‘calculus’ as in maths, a pattern for measuring the rate of change. So if you think about literary criticism as a calculus then it’s always aware of itself, self-conscious of itself in the
present which is changing, moving, so the past that it understands and reshapes is also shifting and changing. The theory behind this is drawn from various fields but it’s most useful, I find, in Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is very good at thinking about how you think about the present. Because he’s thinking about *habitus* and field and the way society works, but always about how exteriorities are understood in terms of *interiorities*, the way in which society forms us and influences our selves, but not entirely, not determinately, not absolutely. I’ve been involved with literary theory over a long period of time and oddly enough it’s now a version of sociology that I find myself drawn to more than anything else. Just because Bourdieu is such a flexible thinker; it’s really the example of his thinking rather than the actual disciplinary context (often a quantitative one). He’s just as flexible in his thinking as Derrida, I think.

**BD:** Well, that question came from *Networked Language* and how it was all about not just the writing but the context in which it was written, and then how it was processed and our understanding of it.

**PM:** It’s also driven by, not an activist sense exactly, but a strong sense of the importance of literature in culture and society. At the same time as I’m aware that it’s marginalised and it may not appear to be particularly important. But I think it is. At various points I’ve seen Literary Studies in Australia be heavily influenced by doubts and crises about the marginalisation of poetry, the lack of relevance of ‘high’ literature as opposed to popular fiction, or whatever, but none of that has ever particularly phased or worried me. Not even the sense that literary studies is a vast social mechanism for reproducing morally schooled, bourgeois subjects!! I never distinguish between ‘popular’ and ‘high’ in my own reading (and teaching), in my own understanding of literary culture, so that was never an issue. I was always committed to a sense that ‘literature’ (high, middle, low, lowest) remains significant, although that significance changes within individuals and cultures. I don’t mean to sound preachy, but it’s about language and the defining centrality of language. It’s about language and meaning, really, and literature – everything literary I mean – is where the most interesting things happen with language. Anyone who’s interested in language is going to end up having some interest in literature at some point. And who isn’t interested in language?

**BD:** Just going back to the trips that you’ve taken, you’ve mentioned the MLA conference in Philadelphia and going to Berlin for a semester teaching Australian literature. Was there anything else that you’ve done overseas since you’ve become Chair? And we’re just wondering, from these international trips that you’ve taken, obviously not only attending conferences but talking to students and teaching students, what impression are you getting of the international perception of Australian literature? Would that have informed your book on Australian literature and its international position?

**PM:** No. What influenced the book, in that sense, was the discipline. In other words, literary criticism and theory in its international, trans-cultural, trans-national forms. What’s happening with critical discourse in North America is of interest to me and I would know and talk to North American critics, others from the UK, Australian colleagues as well obviously. But I’ve always made sure that I’ve kept in touch with where the interesting developments are going in terms of my discipline. And often,
for me, that’s been in North America. So that’s what influenced that aspect of the book, it was taking into account various ways of writing about poetry and thinking about poetry that critics in North America experiment with. Then there’s been those connections with Europe since I’ve been here, but I think we know there’s a huge amount of interest in things related to Australia in China, in Asia: there’s about thirty Australian studies programs in China, and there’s always a demand for people here to go to Asia, Korea, Japan, to talk about Australia and Australian culture. But from my perspective I think it’s just good to be at a place where the university’s tagline, under the logo, is true: internationalisation is taken seriously here, it’s encouraged. That’s what I meant about that tension between being isolated and – what is it people talk about? Perth is the most isolated city in the world? – perhaps that’s why this university has developed that special emphasis on internationalisation.

**BD:** How do Europe and North America, which are the two places that you’ve been to recently, view Australian literature?

**PM:** That’s actually interesting in terms of the discipline, because at MLA I was in a session about Australian literature, where it’s a sub-sub-sub-category of literature in English.

That’s interesting because the MLA is a huge machine, there are thousands of delegates at this annual conference and it books out ten hotels in the city where it’s held. It’s the biggest convention of language and literary studies academics in the world. It’s interesting from the point of view of the ‘empire of criticism’, let’s put it that way, how it works, how it’s structured. The empire of criticism is centred in North America, there’s no doubt about that, and its reach is global. It’s interesting for an Australian because our literature is perceived as a minor literature along with New Zealand, Canada, and other settler nations, we get categorised like that. We can laugh about that and feel that that’s a bit ridiculous, but it’s interesting to put that side-by-side with other aspects of Australian culture that are very assertive. You know, Australian film, Australian studies. You pick up the Saturday papers and you always get the sense that Australians are out to prove something: our films are great, our ballet is great, our opera’s the best in the world, whatever. Right across the cultural range, and in sport – we’re kind of important globally, and we want that, don’t we, as a nation? And so, if a writer wins the Booker Prize – Peter Carey’s won the Booker Prize twice, Tim Winton’s been shortlisted – these are the things that people know about Australian literary culture: that Peter Carey’s a famous Australian author; a film is being made of *Cloudstreet*. It’s about how important and significant our culture is.

But it’s driven, I think, by a kind of anxiety, it’s driven by a sense of ‘we have to push ourselves forward, we have to exert ourselves’, which I guess is okay. My interest is in analysing that, discerning its effects.

Now that’s one point. The weird thing about North America though is that, as the empire of criticism, it’s almost unthinking about its Englishness. Because English literature remains absolutely dominant in terms of literary studies in North America. In other words, the Renaissance, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Victorian – there’s no question that that’s what those thousands of people [at the MLA conference] specialise in, that’s reflected in English courses. There’s an ADE, an Association of Departments of English across the country, it’s hugely important. It’s one of the reasons the *Norton Anthology* sells bejillions every year, because these courses are in every university and every college, and there’s absolutely no doubt for them that that’s educationally appropriate. So I find myself in the odd situation of
talking to Americanist literary scholars who feel similar to me, they say, ‘American literature’s way down the totem pole, it’s also a minor literature.’ Australian literature’s taken more seriously, I think it’s fair to say, in Australian academic literary culture than American literature is taken in America. See what I mean about the empire and the strange effects it produces?

There’s also a sense in which they [Americans] own the canon, in some cases literally; the empire is built on valuable libraries and archives, first folios, etc; in other words North American researchers and scholars, and following them, students, don’t necessarily have to go to England to get to the know the archive. That cultural heritage that was England, they now own, at least in part.

**RM:** Okay, so staying overseas, we were thinking of this idea that Australian writers are becoming more internationalised, more well known. Can you elaborate a bit more on this idea for us and what that has implications for, for Australian identity and Australian voice and so on?

**PM:** I think they are and they aren’t. Some individual writers are very well known but generally speaking Australia is, in terms of literary critical culture, in terms of academic culture, deemed a very minor literature.

An influential book in this respect in recent years has been *The World Republic of Letters*, which is about world literature and how a national literature or author gets to be part of world literature. The author, Pascale Casanova, is a French journalist and critic and she’s very good at describing how the global world of letters and literature works. Australia is only mentioned once or twice in the whole book. She looks at individual careers; she looks at Nobel prize winners; how they work; how individual writers become well known; strategies of translation; migration to cultural centres; and all those sorts of things that produce global importance. Paris is the capital [of literature] in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, Paris is the place where if you want to become a world significant writer, that’s where you go. New York and London today, probably more New York, would be the dominant places in terms of world literature. So it’s paradoxical; you go to New York and people know Peter Carey and maybe David Malouf but they won’t know anything else whatsoever, so that’s the perception from there. Whereas for us, we’ve got our twelve stamps with Australian writers’ portraits, and they’re the ones maybe that we tend to think of as having made a big impact internationally. And maybe Colleen McCullough has, and Carey, and Malouf, and three or four others, but that’s our perception.

One of the things that happened while I was in North America recently was that Norton for the first time published an anthology of Australian literature. Now that’s quite significant because that also came out of the sense, about the same time as the roundtable about the Chair, that Australian texts were out of print and unavailable. That was actually an initiative that came out simultaneously with this Chair. This (PEN Macquarie) anthology of Australian literature is from the beginnings to the contemporary and it’s published by Norton, so it’s the first anthology of Australian literature which has a kind of access to global distribution.

**RM:** And is ‘global’ North American-focused?

**PM:** That’s right.
RM: Because the editor Nicholas [Jose] is at Harvard at the moment.

PM: That’s right, he’s Chair of Australian Studies there. The anthology is an important effort to raise the profile of Australian literary culture. And it has worked. Medium- to long-term I don’t know what sort of effect it might or might not have but you could say that up until now Australia’s had a national literature but it hasn’t had a literature that has been recognised globally in such publishing terms.

BD: Given that you’ve been in universities, and you’ve been in literary journal publishing and scholarly journal publishing and have also published some of your own poetry before, it’s a common question in these kinds of discussions about the state of publishing industry. Such as when you said about that fear for the state of Australian literature and the teaching of Australian literature, it seems to be that maybe it’s kind of a media-instigated fear for the state of the publishing industry. So people say that e-readers are going to ruin the book, and we can’t have overseas imports because none of our authors will have any money, and you were saying all the large publishers are based in Sydney or Melbourne. What actually is your impression of the Australian publishing industry?

PM: It’s a good question, a complex one. I wrote a review article about book history in Australia, which looked at this sort of question in an historical context. What’s remarkable in Australia when you look at the history is just how successful our local and independent publishers have been, when Government policy, and also just international capitalism of one kind of another, have done their best to destroy or make it difficult for a thriving local-national publishing industry. There’s no doubt about that I think. The story of independent Australian publishing is one of incredible success, amazing initiative, and great determination. The story of companies like Allen & Unwin, or Fremantle, or Angus and Robertson before it was stripped in the seventies, are amazing stories of battling what’s called the ‘publishing empire’, centred in the nineteenth century mostly in London. We were a very important market for London publishers because Australians are big book readers and it was recognised that we were big book readers. Therefore, large London publishing sold a lot of books to colonial readers here and in Canada, so the growth of the local publishing industry was a threat. Jumping to the present, we see the takeovers in the last couple of decades, where you get the globalised conglomerates of Pearson, Bertelsmann, HarperCollins and the like – media multinational that are run from Frankfurt and New York and that are connected increasingly to the bookselling chains – the effects of this vertical integration are to make it more and more difficult for local and independent publishing. I have a huge respect and admiration for all kinds of local and independent publishers – just to survive in the current scenario is a wonder.

I’m very much on the side of Tim Winton and Richard Flanagan when it comes to that, and I think most of our writers thought that changing the copyright rules was a damned fool idea. Even though no one really knows exactly what would happen, it could very well be disastrous in terms of locking out independent publishers. And certainly that’s happened before, but Australian publishers have bounced back and found new ways of being successful and publishing Australian books. That’s the copyright side of it. I don’t think I’m a simple-minded nationalist but I do think it’s really important to have an Australian publishing industry, an independent publishing industry, because there just simply are going to be a whole lot of things that don’t get published if it’s run from Frankfurt or New York.
The e-book, e-print revolution – publishers are all anxious about that. In Melbourne recently, I was with a friend who’s a publisher, and she was saying they’re all very anxious about trying to make sure that they don’t miss out on the new directions in e-publishing. Iain Banks, for example, the popular fiction writer, I believe, is now selling his own books over the web and he’s getting directly that first period, say six weeks of sales, that the bookshops used to get. So chains and bookshops are very worried about that, because if you cut them out of that initial stage then that’s where a lot of their profit comes from, the selling of books in that first period of boost and publicity and so on.

On the other hand, I’ve looked at Kindles and will probably get one. But my experience of computers and books is that Amazon has only increased the availability of books. And I wouldn’t necessarily think that that wouldn’t happen [with e-readers]. Anyway we know the problems with Kindles, there are only a limited number of things that are available on them and there’s a whole bunch of stuff that you can’t actually get. Maybe that’ll increase and maybe that’ll get better but still it looks like there won’t be as many things available as you can just get through Amazon. I can order six books a week, very obscure, out-of-print, weird things that I doubt will ever be on Kindle. Also, writers I know are looking forward to their backlists being available through e-readers where a publisher might not want to reprint them for various reasons, mostly cost. Certainly there’s a lot of heat in the issue with publishers, publishers’ organisations, bookselling chains, and authors in Australia at the moment. It’s an interesting issue. It put literature on the front page of the newspaper.

**BD:** And anything that does that is good.

**PM:** It was Tim Winton and Richard Flanagan being angry about it. And Bob Carr, who’s on the board of Dymocks – that’s one of the things that’s really stoking it, because Carr is one of the main spokesmen for the chains and for the change in copyright, and the writing community is really offended by an ex-Labor person being such an aggressive spokesman for the ‘capitalist’ Neilsen BookScan-driven chains.

**RM:** It’s a juicy debate. Before we let you go, what do you think are some of the future directions that the study of Australian literature is heading in? We’ve looked at what you’re looking at and what you’re hoping to do with the Chair, but where do you see the field going?

**PM:** It’s interesting at the moment because there’s so many diverse paths possible within literary studies. Literary studies has never been more diverse than it is now. To other disciplines, literary studies looks like it doesn’t have any core, that it’s not a discipline it’s just a set of disparate practices, which is partly true. But that’s also why it’s so strong, adaptable, why it can keep renewing itself. These days it’s fascinating the range of things that are possible within literary studies, from textual editing to creative writing. There’s never been more variety with what is possible with PhDs and I mark a lot of PhDs. They’re just getting more and more different all the time: they’re creative writing projects, they’re editing projects, they involve CDs, or they’re quantitative analyses using databases, or they’re traditional literary critical history, and everything in between. When counselling new postgraduates, saying ‘Why don’t you think about this?’ can now mean such a huge range of things, which is the really good thing about literary studies, it’s very vital, its very alive. Even though it’s quite
small in Australia, it’s still of a comparably high standard to literary studies in the northern hemisphere.

That has issues for how we train undergraduates, that’s going to be really important, because you can’t have that range of postgraduate possibilities without a disciplinary training and grounding. It’s a strange paradox. I’m one of those people who thinks interdisciplinary projects are great but they have to extend out from disciplinary bases. To have exciting, innovative postgraduate work, you need quite solid grounding and training in undergraduate disciplines. I know that sounds paradoxical but I think it’s important. I think you need really good, well-defined historical, survey and theoretical courses at undergraduate level. But then the possibilities for research and research directions seem endless at the moment.

Now probably one of the most noticeable things that’s happening within English studies is the growth of creative writing – that’s happening everywhere. Sometimes it starts off as a separate writing program, sometimes – as with us, and as it was in Tasmania – it’s well integrated into the English program, which I think is a better idea. Otherwise, you get this sort of strange effect, as you get sometimes in North America, where the people who are in creative writing programs, as they’re called, are separate and that’s all they do and they have little communication sometimes with the critics and the readers and the literary studies people.

So in Australia I think we’re much better at integrating creative writing into English, into literary studies – or even better, reformulating ‘English’ to incorporate creative writing. I suspect this development will lead to more emphasis on kinds of non-fiction writing, I don’t think it’ll necessarily go the way of fiction and poetry. I think it will be influenced by theory, criticism, fictocriticism, and there’ll be an increase in interest in forms of non-fiction – generically adventurous and free forms of non-fiction. There will still be those interested in writing film scripts and plays and novels and so on, but I think for a lot of students there will be other things to look at. But English departments/programs are small, and so I think it is important to move institutions for postgraduate study. I think there should be incentives to move interstate or between institutions, and overseas exchanges for postgraduates should be much more available.

RM: Professor Mead, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to Limina today.

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