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Shantaram: Portrait of an Australian Bestseller

Gregory David Roberts’ semi-autobiographical novel Shantaram has been an Australian bestseller since its original publication in 2003. Marketed largely as non-fiction, Shantaram presents a fictionalised version of the author’s experiences as a criminal on the run, particularly his adventures in the Mumbai underworld. Roberts’ novel stands out in the field of Australian literary production, which has been characterised by declining fiction sales in recent years. Following in the footsteps of many notable convict authors, Roberts has also drawn on a number of generic conventions to produce one of the most notable bestsellers in Australian publishing history. A novel displaying elements of popular fiction, literary fiction and autobiography, Shantaram unsettles categories, consequently it has attracted little academic consideration. With a narrative that straddles Australia and India, Shantaram displays a “cosmopolitanism”, which has allowed it to transcend national boundaries. In terms of its popularity, Shantaram is fairly anomalous in the Australian literary landscape. Its healthy sales figures challenge the notion that Australian novels are not read by local, let alone global audiences. The ongoing success of Shantaram in Australia and overseas can also be partly attributed to Roberts’ entrepreneurial approach to promoting his writing, which is intimately bound up with his colourful “criminal” persona. The provenance of Shantaram – and the varied phenomena associated with it – serve to illuminate significant aspects of the current publishing scene. Due to the dearth of extended critical writing on Shantaram, this article largely draws upon reviews from newspapers and periodicals along with online fan responses to account for its steadily growing readership.

Introduction

In 1978, Gregory David Roberts (formerly known as Gregory John Peter Smith) committed a series of armed robberies in Melbourne while addicted to heroin, and was later sentenced to nineteen years imprisonment. Shantaram is the story of Roberts’ escape from Pentridge prison in 1980, and his ten years on the run in Asia, before his extradition from Germany and the completion of his sentence back in Australia. Promoted as a novel based on the author’s own experiences, it has the appeal of autobiography while retaining the “artistic license” of fiction. Shantaram follows the adventures of the protagonist Lindsey or “Lin” in Mumbai – and later in Afghanistan – after his escape from Pentridge. The narrative begins with Lin’s arrival in India with a forged passport and new identity. At first he sees the city through the eyes of the backpackers he befriends, but soon becomes familiar with world of the slums thanks to his local guide Prabaker. It is as a result of Prabaker’s invitation to visit his home village in Maharashtra that Lin is dubbed “Shantaram” or “man of peace”, despite his violent past. This re-naming allows Lin to reinvent himself and begin to make amends for his crimes. The labyrinthine plot mimics the collection of dwellings Lin encounters when he enters the vast slum region of Mumbai. The narrative twists and turns, following Lin’s skirmishes in the underworld, his romantic attachment to Karla, a mysterious
Swiss businesswoman, and his attempts at redemption through service as a slum doctor.

**An Australian desperate in Bombay**

Although *Shantaram* may seem unique in the context of the contemporary Australian literary scene, it joins a considerable tradition of Australian writing about India. Australia’s first travel book about India is James Hingston’s *The Australian Abroad* (1879) which reveals Hingston’s fascination with “the strangeness and intractable difference of the mysterious East”. (Walker 17-19) Another notable work, Mollie Skinner’s *Tucker Sees India* (1937) features Tucker, a rough and ready Australian who gets caught up in a number of Indian adventures en route to the “real” war. Bruce Bennett observes that at the end of the novel, Tucker has “seen India” and is ready for anything life may throw at him. (Bennett 555) In this sense India is seen as a testing ground, or place of initiation for rough and ready colonials.

In more recent times, a number of Australian authors have travelled in India and written about their experiences, including Christopher Koch, Murray Bail, David Malouf, Kate Llewellyn and Inez Baranay, amongst others. In an essay entitled “Crossing the Gap: Asia and the Australian Imagination”, Christopher Koch reflects upon the parallels he has observed between India and Australia: “We tend to think in Australia of “turning to Asia” – as though this were a new adaptation. But there is a sense in which we have always been conscious of Asia, since we began as part of that Empire whose linchpin was India. India was always there for our imaginations to roam in”, he argues. (Koch 16) Similarly Alison Broinowski argues that:

> nothing reminds us so much of the fictional Asia we used to know and love (or know and fear) as an Australian thriller about a past crisis in some Asian country. The questing Australian male (usually) who was tempted and challenged, and muddled through mayhem, has been around in fiction and fact about Asia for over a century. (Broinowski)

Here Broinowski draws attention to the long tradition of formulaic writing about Asia, featuring questing masculine protagonists. Helen Tiffin observes that the late twentieth century saw a new awareness of Asia in Australian writing. “Asia”, according to Tiffin, was transformed from “an exotic stereotypically constructed backdrop” to a “territory of the Australian psyche”. (Tiffin 468) Broinowski agrees that the face of fiction about Asia changed in the 1990s along with the faces of those writing about it. Since the 1990s, argues Broinowski, the new faces are predominantly Asian-Australian and female. (Broinowski)

*Shantaram* might be seen as a continuation of the tradition of Westerners visiting Asia to discover enlightenment from the 1960s onwards. Young Western travellers of the 1960s and 1970s made pilgrimages to “discover themselves”, often with the help of mind-altering substances. Potheads as well as pilgrims took the hippie trail described by Richard Neville as being “paved with cannabis”. (qtd. In Gerster 8) In *Play Power* (1970),
Neville offers a portrait of the “new gypsies who flow across the world” turning to criminal pursuits to fund their travels. The narrator suggests that young tourists might engage in begging, smuggling, gun-running and prostitution in order to sustain their “freedom”. (Neville qtd. in Gerster 298-302) Like Neville’s gypsies who live on the fringes of the law, the hero of *Shantaram* lives in a foreign country by nefarious means. He works as a middleman between young travellers and drug-dealers in an anarchic, lawless world that is only rendered intelligible by the close friendships he makes.

Peter Pierce has described Roberts’ novel as “an intriguing addition to the literature of Australian engagement with Asia.” He observes that it contains the “usual eastern mentor figures”, such as the Frenchman Didier and the druglord Khader Khan, who provide the hero with spiritual guidance. “What is distinctive and arresting” about the novel Pierce argues, is “an Australian desperate’s attempt to make a decent Asian life.” (Pierce) Roberts’ hero is largely unsuccessful at creating a truly “decent” life, due to his entanglement with the Mumbai mafia, yet his life in the slum is deeply transformational on a “spiritual” level. Roberts describes his relationship with India are an enduring love story:

I didn't assimilate to India’s culture, I surrendered to it. And I didn't just live in the city of Bombay: I fell in love with Her. I opened my life to Bharat Mataji, or Mother India. The city, Bombay, amchi Mumbai, did what love always does to the heart: she raised me up to the great view of the high ground, and let me walk with the lions. That's how I interacted with the city and the nation. I fell in love, and I surrendered to the passion. (Roberts qtd in Gathman 36)

In spite of his claim to have “surrendered” to the nation of India, it might be argued that Roberts reproduces colonial power dynamics in his writing. Just as his portrayal of himself is open to scrutiny, Roberts’ descriptions of Indian people are also potentially problematic. *Shantaram* is alive with the interesting characters that Lin meets during his adventures. Prabaker, with his “dazzling smile” is perhaps one of the most fully described figures in the earlier sections of the novel. The hero’s immense affection for Prabaker is obvious yet his eccentric English-speaking is frequently a source of humour. The scene in which Prabaker explains about washing practices provides a good example. At this point in the novel, Lin has just taken an outdoor shower naked which is taboo, as far as Prabaker is concerned. He explains that “nobody is ever naked in India. And nobody is naked without clothes”: a seemingly contradictory statement. Prabaker goes on to tell Lin that in India: “the men are wearing this over-pants, under their clothes, at all times, and in all situations. Even if they are wearing *under*-underpants, still they are wearing *over*-underpants, *over* their unders, you see?” (Shantaram 121) Predictably, Lin fails to understand, but agrees to follow Prabaker’s instructions for washing in future. Even though Roberts has moved beyond the usual shallow tourist gaze, engaging sympathetically with everyday street-life in Mumbai — unlike many Western
writers preceding him — elements of caricature in his representation of Indian people still persist.

**The “Gentleman” Bandit**

Gregory David Roberts comes from a long line of Australian convict authors, beginning with James Tucker, author of *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (1839) and Henry Savery who wrote *Quintus Servinton* (1829). These novels, along with *Shantar*am were allegedly written while in jail, with Tucker and Savery receiving special dispensation to write. Roberts claims that the determination to write about the convict experience was forged during his imprisonment in India, while being tortured:

> In the constant struggle to lift my face from the bleeding, red puddle of sweat and tears, I was choked by the fear that I would drown in my own blood. In that terror, in that clamp-jawed defiance, I heard the clear, indomitable writer’s voice in the deepest part of my mind: "Damn, this is good material! If you live through this, you’ve got to write it down!” (Roberts qtd in Gathman 36)

When he was finally sentenced and re-incarcerated in Australia, he began writing *Shantaram* which was, according to Roberts, twice destroyed by two different prison guards. Roberts claims that the 1st and 2nd drafts of his novel manuscript were destroyed by “sadistic” prison guards, but he ended up being grateful to them as these punitive acts served to make the final version far more nuanced:

*Shantaram* changed as a result of that destruction, and it’s a far more complex book, for its long, agonised gestation period, than it ever would’ve been had they just let me write it from the first draft.

(http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/shantaram2.asp)

Roberts’ descriptions of the torture he endured in India are reminiscent of the accounts of convicts from Australia’s penal colonies who were subjected to frequent floggings. A developing nation like India, with a more “primitive” judicial system, provides a perfect backdrop for Roberts’ account of a fugitive being brutally punished for his crimes. Bruce Bennett argues that novels by convicts or ex-convicts, such as Savery’s *Quintus Servinton* and John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne* (1879) have played important roles in setting a stage for subsequent Australian narratives.(Bennett)1 Arguably these “foundation” texts enabled the flourishing of convict narratives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the twentieth century, Richard Nile notes, prisons themselves became the sites of some of the very first creative writing courses taught in the

1 Both novels were significantly modeled on the convict authors’ lives. Unlike Savery who eventually died in prison, O’Reilly made his escape from the convict system and transformed Australia into a land of hope and opportunity in his writing.
country (Nile 216). Kevin Gilbert wrote poetry while serving time. Mark Chopper Reid enjoyed greater literary freedoms to become something of a literary celebrity. Peter Kocan, imprisoned for his attempted murder of Opposition leader Arthur Calwell later became an award-winning author. Kocan went down in the history of Australian fiction for having written a pair of companion novellas largely inspired from his experience as an inmate at the Long Bay Correctional Centre (Sydney) and then confined to Ward 6 for the criminally insane. (Vernay 61) As Jean-François Vernay argues Kocan’s semi-fictions can be interpreted as “a national allegory of Australian penal settlement...” (Vernay 61) Similarly Robert Merritt, wrote *The Cake Man* (1978), the first published play by a Black Australian while incarcerated in Bathurst gaol in 1974 to express “the root causes of Aboriginal despair.” (Shoemaker 337) His fellow inmate Jim McNeil author of *The Chocolate Frog, The Old Familiar Juice* (1973) and *How Does Your Garden Grow?* (1974), also provided vivid pictures of life behind bars. (Thomson 295)

Roberts’ novel has brought the convict narrative back into the limelight with his eye-opening narrative featuring incarceration, torture and institutional sadism. The criminal aspects of Roberts’ personal history have been foregrounded by his publisher and the media, at least partly in order to appeal to the reading public’s predilection for crime narratives. Jane Sullivan has commented on the Australian fondness for crooked writers, claiming that these “rogues” have to write to expiate their demons, creating “great art out of extremes”. Their appeal comes from their “Ned Kelly-like identity as the outsider, rising up against the dead weight of authority and tradition.” (Sullivan 10)

Indeed, Roberts’ protagonist Lin acknowledges his own connection with the most famous Australian fugitive:

> I loved the Ned Kelly story when I was a kid. I wasn’t the only one. Artists and writers and musicians and actors have all worked on the story, in one way or another. He put himself inside us, the Australian psyche. He’s the nearest thing we’ve got to Che Guevara, or Emílio Zapata. (510)

In his drug-addled fantasies, Lin dreams of being killed by the police, like the members of Ned Kelly’s gang, as a way out of the nightmare of his addiction. Rather than dying violently, he survives to write about his experiences.

In interviews Roberts has indicated his willingness to be aligned with Ned Kelly, but is less pleased by comparisons with the late Mark “Chopper” Read. Inevitably, Roberts’ work has been compared to the “true crime” works written by the notorious “Chopper”, but Roberts himself sees no similarities between *Shantaram* and Chopper’s series of flippant crime recollection books. Instead Roberts regards his book project as being a “tale of exile, alienation and, ultimately, redemption.” (Roberts qtd. by Sutherland 11-12) As a university educated, white middle class writer – albeit with a police record – Roberts’ work is intended for a different audience to that of the proudly working class Chopper Read’s books.

Through his semi-autobiographical narrative Roberts re-writes his own criminal past in the tradition of social banditry. Eric Hobsbawm defines social
banditry as a “political movement of individual or minority rebellion” (Hobsbawm 19). Hobsbawm brands social bandits as a special breed of outlaw who depends on the support from their community. A social bandit’s protest against authority may be personal, but importantly, he speaks on behalf of his supporters and sympathisers. Roberts’ “redemptive” actions amongst the poor in India – setting up a mobile medical clinic in the slums of Mumbai, building pucca housing and a school in a nearby village and a foray into micro-financing to assist small local businesses – make him appear as a Robin-hood figure. (Sangghvi)

Hobsbawm asserts that for outlaws to retain their support against the authorities, they must redistribute their wealth and never rob from the local poor. Indeed, all outlaws are expected to rob, but how they rob is perhaps their most defining characteristic. (Gaunson 31) Though remorseful for his crimes, Roberts prided himself on the polite way he robbed people. He was dubbed “Mr Cool” and “the Gentleman Bandit” by the media because of his neat, unmasked appearance and pleasant manner.

During an interview after the publication of his novel Roberts emphasised that he was not turned in by a member of the public, instead he suspects it was his drug dealer who wanted to avoid prosecution. (Rule 25) This belief allows him to maintain his reputation as a “likable” rogue. The manner in which he stole is supposed to “soften” the seriousness of his crimes. Furthermore, his good Samaritan actions as a “slum doctor” and benefactor also serve to humanise a hardened criminal, if only in the minds of Shantaram’s fans.

In a discussion of Shantaram in the Age, Cameron Woodhead suggests that for Roberts “fiction is much truer to his sense of that time than autobiography could ever be. Life on the run is a life of lies; and lying; as the only way to get at the truth, is what fiction is on about.” (Woodhead 5) As a former criminal, fiction is a more elastic medium for Roberts to operate within – it can be stretched to accommodate the conglomeration of sometimes wildly implausible narratives that constitute the novel.

Critical Reception

When we talk about the reception of fiction, Mary Leontsini and Jean-Marc Leveratto observe, our statements are based on the critical activity of professional critics serving printed large-scale media or addressing the readership of in-depth pervasive and sophisticated reviews by academics. (Leontsini and Leveratto 166) After its initial publication Shantaram was reviewed extensively in the Australian print media, yet it has failed to generate much academic commentary from local critics since.

Shantaram’s “cosmopolitanism” has enabled it to be reviewed widely overseas, unlike most debut Australian novels which usually receive limited critical attention, if they are lucky. The vast majority of responses to Shantaram have been posted online in “amateur” forums. Consequently this discussion draws on “serious” critical responses to the novel along with a range of online responses contributed by “non-professional” readers. Danielle Fuller makes a convincing case for the importance of taking the reading
practices of people who read blockbusters and bestsellers seriously not least because these texts cut across constructed categories. (Fuller 83)

One of the possible reasons for its neglect by critics is its generic hybridity, particularly its resemblance to various forms of popular fiction. *Shantaram* might be described as a “multi-generic” novel due to its many influences. Gelder and Salzman have described it as an “adventure/travel/organised crime” novel. (Gelder and Salzman 3) Popular fiction, especially uncategorisable titles like *Shantaram*, are generally overlooked by academic writers. As Toni Johnston-Woods notes “Genre fiction and popular fiction are not synonymous: neither does popular necessarily mean ‘trash’ fiction. Popular fiction can be literary fiction — and not all best-selling fiction is genre fiction.” (Johnston-Woods 14) *Shantaram* doesn’t fit into any particular generic category but demonstrates affinities with a few simultaneously.

Jeff Zaleski’s description of *Shantaram* as “a massive, thrillingly undomesticated potboiler” is symptomatic of the general bemusement of critics towards the book’s sheer bulk and generic indeterminacy. (Zaleski 35) While it contains elements in common with crime fiction, *Shantaram* does not adhere to the standard templates that characterise the genre. Many crime novels feature regular protagonists or “investigators” who recur throughout sequels; in this case Roberts’ protagonist Lin (a known criminal) is based on himself so there is a more complicated relationship between the main character and the author. Lin might be seen as a “hero” in some ways, but he is not a standard investigator or crime-fighter.

Although it’s a novel rather than a guidebook, travellers have appreciated its detailed descriptions of the texture of everyday life in India, informed by the author’s evident familiarity with the country. *Shantaram* has become a “must-read” title for Westerners visiting India and it has set the bar for travel and adventure books set there. Hari Menon claims that *Shantaram* is “arguably one of the most accurate pictures in English of this frustrating, rewarding, complex city by the Arabian Sea”. (Menon) He observes that English writing hasn’t yet plumbed Bombay’s depths but so far no writer in English has told Bombay’s story better than “this Aussie on the lam”. (Menon)

*Shantaram* received mixed reviews when it was first released, with professional reviewers praising the novel but also raising concerns about the relationship between fact and fiction in the text. In his review in *Australian Book Review* Rodney Beecham compares Roberts to Hemingway, arguing that *Shantaram* recalls *The Sun Also Rises* in the “visceral immediacy of its street life.” (Beecham 49) In a more critical piece, Patrick Ness of the *Telegraph* asks us to consider the hubris of writing a book about yourself and calling it

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3 It has generated at least one notable Australian imitator, Aaron Smith’s *Shanti Bloody Shanti: An Indian Odyssey* (2011). The back cover blurb: "Fleeing his shady Australian past, Aaron Smith travels to India and encounters a murder mystery, witnesses the tragic death of a friend, dodges terrorist attacks and a revolution and befriends a colourful cast of fellow characters fit for a Bollywood flick".
“man of peace”, and making it stretch to nine hundred and thirty six pages, even when it’s only the first volume of a projected four. According to Ness, the “gratingly heroic” way Roberts portrays himself is only mitigated by the generous descriptions of people he obviously loved a great deal. (Ness)

*Meanjin* reviewer Sunil Badami argues that Roberts’ alter-ego Lin is unbelievably likeable (a quality that other reviewers also identify):

He remains a gangster, taking part in violence, running guns, committing crimes, but Roberts is at pains to stress that Lin never kills or hurts others except in self-defence; he only stays with the mafia out of loyalty...It’s a double-handed absolution, morally expedient. (Badami 205)

*Shantaram* has been promoted using Robert’s life story as a hook, resulting in a pronounced blurring of the boundaries between the author and his protagonist in the minds of readers. This has led reviewers – and fans – to question the decision to publish it as a novel rather than autobiography. As Ness comments: “If his life is as amazing as it seems, why coat it in fiction?”

Likewise Megan O’Grady of the *New York Times* wonders: “Why, given Roberts’s wealth of material and penchant for soul-searching, didn't he write a memoir?” (O’Grady) Roberts decision to write a work of fiction has allowed him greater latitude with the facts which would be denied to a memoir.  

Roberts has consistently refused to be drawn about which events were fabricated, choosing not answer such specific questions. In an interview with BBC news online, Roberts has said that “all the substantial events... are real events. Some of the other events were invented to help with the narrative.” (Roberts qtd. by Summers) Avijit Ghosh of the Calcutta newspaper the *Telegraph* comments that: “sifting facts from fiction isn’t easy, especially in a book where reality and creative imagination are like Siamese twins.” (Ghosh)

Extended commentary on Roberts’ work beyond the initial reviews in periodicals has failed to materialise, although the international media continues to be intrigued by his life-story. Roberts has generated far more online traffic, especially interviews and amateur reviews on writing, or book-related websites such as Goodreads and LibraryThing. At the time of writing this article, the amazon.com page for *Shantaram* featured 748 customer reviews, which is a relatively clear demonstration of its appeal. Out of these 758 reviews, 539 reviewers gave the book five stars. Leontsini and Leveratto argue that books as commodities on the amazon.com site perform as “pleasure generators”; the number of stars each book gains is an expansion of the 19th century tourist industry rating of hotels. (Leontsini and Leveratto 167)

Interestingly, posts by readers participating in online forums often echo concerns of the “professional” reviewers. A brief sample from the site marginal revolution reveals two different perspectives:

I feel misled by this book. I enjoyed it immensely as a biographical tale, but am left with a sour taste as it appears that it is more of a tale with a mere taste of biography. I think it is

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4 The controversy over James Frey's memoir of addiction *A Million Little Pieces* (2004) and the revelation that large portions were “invented” is a salutary lesson about the expectations of readers.
intentional blurring of the lines between two necessarily separate types of prose. I would read these two types quite differently. (CN, marginal revolution)

Meanwhile other online reviewers take the opportunity to critique the conventional literary establishment:

This book should have won the Booker Prize. Of course it didn’t, and it won’t, but that is a reflection on the literary establishment, rather than the other way around. For all the sentence tuners out there, look for the force behind the plain language and simple writing, and compare it to the mindless garbage that sometimes hides behind a thesaurus re-written as a literary novel. (Richard, marginal revolution)

Here, “Richard” claims that the book has been misunderstood and poorly reviewed by elitists who do not recognise its worth. Shantaram has been shortlisted for Commonwealth Writers Prize (2004) and the Booksellers Choice Award (2003) and chosen by the Australian public in an ABC poll as Australia’s 67th favourite book (2004) yet it has not won a major literary prize to date. Richard’s spirited defence of the novel is common amongst Shantaram supporters, suggesting that there is a perceived tension between “highbrow” literary critics and the largely “popular” audience of the novel.

Passages of florid prose in the novel may have precluded the awarding of literary prizes, since these are more acceptable in so-called “popular fiction”. As Patrick Ness notes: “Roberts tells his story in prose so purple you could make claret from it.” (Ness) The book was longlisted for the Guardian’s Bad Sex award (2004), due to its over-the-top description of a sexual encounter between Lin and Karla:

I was hers. She was mine. My body was her chariot, and she drove it into the sun. Her body was my river, and I became the sea. And the wailing moan that drove our lips together, at the end, was the world of hope and sorrow that ecstasy wrings from lovers as it floods their souls with bliss. (Guardian)

This is the kind of overblown prose that would not be out of place in a romance novel, once again demonstrating Shantaram’s flirtation with a range of generic styles.

A Global Bestseller

Judging by its sales figures, Shantaram may be considered an Australian – and international – bestseller. Naturally the term “bestseller” is very elastic and depends on context for its significance. In the Australian publishing environment, Shantaram can be classified as a steady-selling bestseller, which has longevity over an extended period. According to Nielsen BookScan figures, Shantaram has sold approximately 280,000 copies in Australia since its publication. (Webster) Although Shantaram’s sales figures easily outstrip
most “literary” novels released in the last decade, its national sales compare
less favourably with bestselling popular fiction writers such as Bryce
Courtenay who sold 342,000 copies in 2009/10, Di Morrissey 399,000 in the
same two years and John Marsden who sold 288,000 in two years. (Webster)
Published in 36 territories, the novel has now sold three million copies, with
approximately 30,000 being sold each month according to the Regal Literary
agency. (Regal).

Arguably, the term bestseller is so overused that it is an extremely
imprecise descriptor. As Clive Bloom notes, a bestseller can be simply defined
as a work of fiction sold in the most units (books in a given price range) to the
most people over a set period of time. In practice, Bloom observes, the
definition of the bestseller is complex due to the definition of units, the period
of time and the importance of the price at which it is sold and the definition of
fiction itself. (Bloom 28)

Rarely out of the annual top 200 titles in Australia, as recorded by
Nielsen BookScan, Shantaram has grown in popularity since its publication.
As online reviews and comments attest, it has a global reading public, in sharp
contrast with many other Australian novels that have poor sales. Malcolm
Knox has linked the decline in literary publishing in Australia to the
introduction of the BookScan system. He claims that now we see two kinds of
literary novelist: “There are commercially viable novelists and there are ex-
novelists.” (Knox 51)

In his essay “The Decline of the Literary Paradigm” (2006) Mark
Davis uses Shantaram as a rare example of an Australian-published “literary”
novel that generates good sales, along with those of well-known authors such
as Andrew McGahan and Tim Winton. (Davis qtd. in Galligan & Carter 92)
Davis charts the diminishing publication and consumption of literary fiction
sales in Australia since the start of the current century. “By the early 2000s
almost no major Australian publisher was aggressively seeking or promoting
new literary fiction at the forefront of their lists, and literary fiction was no
longer the cornerstone of the industry’s self-perception.” (Davis qtd. in
Galligan & Carter 94) Here Davis argues that literary fiction has traditionally
held a privileged place within the publishing industry and the wider culture. In
a globalised economy dominated by global entertainment corporations, Davis
envisages that the publishing of literary fiction will soon be confined to two
strands: blockbusters and fetish objects. (Davis qtd. in Galligan & Carter 103-
104)

As John Thompson argues in Merchants of Culture (2010), the
publishing industry is now dominated by multinational companies that
demand increased profit year-by-year. For a mature industry like publishing
this is a difficult task, therefore publishing houses have tended to focus their
attention on fewer “bigger” books, putting their support behind what
Thompson terms the next “hoped-for bestseller”. (Thompson 193) This makes
the publication of a first novel by an unknown author like Gregory David
Roberts – without a proven track record – even more exceptional.

Shantaram represented a success story for the small independent
Australian publishing house Scribe, before the book was taken over by Pan
Macmillan. Originally, Shantaram was published by Scribe as a hardcover and
later as a paperback. It is an unlikely success story, as Henry Rosenbloom
explains: “We picked this unknown guy, we published a 940-page debut novel in hardback and turned it into a huge success. We ended up selling over 35,000 hardbacks and close to 100,000 paperbacks before the rights were taken away from us. It’s been a huge success and a huge vindication of a risky judgement.” (Cassin)

Following an acrimonious dispute between Scribe and Roberts in 2003, rights to all forms of the local publication of *Shantaram* reverted to the author when Scribe sold its remaining stock of hardbacks. Pan Macmillan then began publication of the novel under the Picador label with plans to publish the sequel *Mountain Shadow*. *Publisher’s Weekly* reported in June 2010 that *Shantaram* had become an “international phenomenon”, with healthy global sales a Warner Bros film option on *Shantaram*. In “Deal of the Week” Rachel Deahl notes that a lucrative deal for the U.S. and Canadian rights to *Shantaram*’s sequel *The Mountain Shadow* was brokered by Joe Regal at the Regal Literary agency. (Deahl 11)

As a regular money-spinner, the departure of *Shantaram* from Scribe’s list represents a significant loss. However this is not unusual this age of the mass media publisher. As Clive Bloom remarks, in the current publishing environment best-selling authors often change hands as if they were sports celebrities. (Bloom 83)

**The Mediagenic author**

It is almost commonplace to remark that big name authors have become brands in the contemporary literary marketplace. In the current publishing environment, “the author need not be a real person, rather the name must designate a brand, a genre and a style”. (Bloom 33) The author’s name now has the potency of a commercial product. Intentionally or not, the moniker “Gregory David Roberts” itself carries traces of his criminal past, as criminals are generally identified by the use of their Christian and second names. This name is itself a pseudonym, since the author was originally known as “Gregory John Peter Smith” before he changed his name by deedpoll to Roberts, his mother’s family name. This name – albeit partly invented – now indicates a brand of authorship, peculiar to Roberts, which can be further augmented to promote any future literary products he delivers.

In order to be successfully promoted, literary authors need a “platform” that can assist with the marketing process, to encourage brand recognition. Platform is the position from which an author speaks, a combination of their credentials, visibility and promotability, especially through the media (Thompson 203). Roberts’ unique selling point is undoubtedly his colourful life of crime, with his escape from Pentridge as the incredible achievement that encourages us to believe that he is truly capable of anything.

Paul Delany observes that “sales of bestselling books are now driven by their author’s appearances on television and radio, and effective self-presentation is at least as important as the book itself.” (Delany184) The

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5 According to industry reports, actor Johnny Depp and director Mira Nair were linked with pre-production of the film, until it ground to a halt in 2009.
Roberts brand has been suitably embellished and enhanced by the extra-textual promotional activities of the author, complete with images of the author riding motorbikes, pumping iron and mixing with celebrities like Madonna and Johnny Depp. The many promotional images of Roberts riding motorbikes in black leathers with mirror shades are reminiscent of the ultra-masculine photos of Norman Mailer used for the packaging and sales of his books. The dustjacket for *American Dream* shows Mailer shadow-boxing, while *Why are we in Vietnam?* carries a picture of the author sporting a black eye. (Moran 72) These poses were part of the construction of Mailer’s “bad boy” persona which was carefully cultivated throughout his career. Roberts’ reputation is similar to Mailer’s in its combination of “careerist manoeuvres and high-minded literary aspirations” (Moran 74)

The photographs of Roberts in various ultra-masculine poses have complemented the strategies of Roberts’ publishers – both Scribe and Pan Macmillan – to promote the novel as exceptional and unprecedented. The original blurb on the Scribe website claimed that *Shantaram* is: “a compelling tale of a hunted man who had lost everything – his home, his family and his soul – and came to find his humanity while living at the wildest edge of experience. Nothing like this has been written before, and nobody but Greg Roberts could have written it now.” (Beecham 49) This blurb is largely repeated on the Pan Macmillan site which also suggests that it “can be read as a vast, extended thriller, as well as a superbly written meditation on the nature of good and evil.” (Pan Macmillan) As these promotional materials attest, the novel has been heavily marketed in terms of its representation of the author’s real-life travails. The emphasis is on the persecution of the author; he is presented as a “hunted man” who loses everything and lives to write about it. The tawdry reality of Roberts’ armed robbery and imprisonment is less easily sutured into the promotional material for the novel because the story of a “wronged man” is much more palatable for a general audience.

As the book publishing industry is increasingly rationalised, reducing the likelihood of first time authors making it big, the dream of overnight success remains as prevalent as ever. New York Times reporter Peter Applebome comments that “[e]very writer these days is a combination marketer-littératour who feels he’s one Oprah call away from hitting the jackpot.” (Applebome) In order to make an impression on the “closed shop” of the publishing industry novice writers need to be mediagenic, with well-developed promotional skills. Along with other successful author-entrepreneurs, Roberts has successfully translated his dark past into a selling point, using his website www.shantaram.com as his primary communication tool. According to an interview with DNA India, Roberts receives around 600-700 emails from fans every week. (Sangghvi) Roberts’ active and ongoing engagement with his fans via his website indicates a respect for his devoted readers which is characteristic of popular fiction writers, as opposed to the indifferent attitude that is often displayed by authors of “literary fiction”. As Gelder observes: “Authors of literary fiction can sometimes seem utterly remote from their readers, disdainful of them or simply indifferent to their needs” (Gelder 24) Roberts’ website features a section called “Your Issues” which offers advice on topics such as “Drug Problems” and “Breaking Away”; topics with which he has been intimately acquainted. (www.shantaram.com)
Readers who are pre-occupied with the themes of addiction and escape in *Shantaram* use the website to connect with Roberts who provides some self-help style advice. Roberts actively encourages the slippage between *Shantaram* and his own biography, unlike other authors who are more intransigent about the relationship the between their life and work.

**Conclusion**

Wenche Ommundsen observes that recent Australian literature scholarship has focussed on its transnational dimensions (Dixon 2007, Carter 2007, Gelder 2010) and while this so-called “trans-national turn” has not gone unchallenged (Huggan 2009), it signals a shift in critical thinking towards an enquiry into the global, national and local interconnectedness which feeds into the literary experience both at the point of creation and the point of reception. (Ommundsen 2013)

Robert Dixon has identified what he calls “new cosmopolitanism” in a number of contemporary Australian novels. This new variant of cosmopolitanism is marked by a kind of free-floating or travelling identity. Susan K Martin also notes that many contemporary Australian novels offer a notion of identity as fluid and self-inventing, but rather an identity “fruitfully suspended between two points.” (Martin qtd in Gelder and Salzman 114-115) Arguably *Shantaram* might be described as a cosmopolitan text given the cultural mobility of its protagonist, and the author himself. Unlike many local novels, the action largely takes place in India and Afghanistan, enabling a much larger global audience than a book set solely in Australia. Pradeep Trikha draws attention to the novel’s cosmopolitan qualities arguing that “the opening of the novel suggests that Lindsay is a fugitive on the run for the sake of freedom and he is an immigrant by choice, therefore considers every country his “home” and is not frightened by the experience of the unknown.” (Trikha 124)

The amazon.com page for *Shantaram* describes Roberts a fulltime writer who is “at home in several countries” (amazon). It is difficult to locate where Roberts lives most of the time, delivering the impression that he is a “citizen of the world”. Geordie Williamson has argued that the Australian literary landscape has altered dramatically, enabling writers such as Christos Tsiolkas, Nam Le and J.M. Coetzee to maintain international reputations while being associated with Australia. “Like some tax-free island haven, a globalised, trans-national literature seems to have found in Australia a place of balmy breezes and light regulation and decided to make of it a home.” (Williamson 2009) The “new” amenability to cosmopolitan fiction that Williamson identifies has allowed Roberts to be associated with Australia and India simultaneously, without being firmly tethered to either country.

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As an exemplar of a contemporary Australian bestseller Shantaram is instructive from a number of angles, raising questions about genre distinctions and the workings of taste as well as drawing attention to the practices of publishers, consumers and fans. It’s not easy to simply explain the Shantaram phenomenon yet this discussion has offered some clues towards an understanding of its cultural significance. Whether Shantaram will ultimately be considered an Australian “classic”, with an abiding influence on authors writing about Asia, is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, this polarising novel has produced a whole range of extra-textual practices that will ensure that it remains in the cultural imagination for years to come.


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