**TEXT Vol 15 No 1 (April 2011)**

## Reviews contents

**TEXT review**

# Where we come from

## *review by Enza Gandolfo*


Janie Conway-Herron
*Beneath the Grace of Clouds*
Cookatoo Books, Federal, 2010
ISBN: 9780646538396
Pb 217pp AUD30.00

In the prologue to her debut novel, *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, Janie Conway-Herron introduces herself as a collector: 'I collect lost stories, the ones that people forget or the ones that people know but don't tell.' In the first of many stories that follows, Conway-Herron tells us of her interaction with a Sydney taxi driver who asks her, 'Where're you from?' When she responds, 'Sydney', he remains unsatisfied and unconvinced:

> 'No, where were you born?'
> ... 'I was born in Sydney.'
> 'But your parents, they weren't born in Sydney,' he chuckles knowingly.
> 'They were actually.'
> 'No! I don't believe it!' he yells. 'You look like a Lebanese girl, maybe Spanish or Turkish. That's it. Your grandparents were Turkish like me ... You should be proud of who you are. All my family are Australian citizens, but my children know where they come from. They're not ashamed like some.' (8)

In response to his further probing Conway-Herron reveals that there is some question around the identity of one of her grandmothers, a secret she hasn't yet discovered:

> 'My grandmother … didn't want anyone to know who she really was.'
> … 'And now you don't know who you are.'
> I smile, looking straight at him for the first time in this short but intimate journey. 'Sometimes I wonder if it matters.'
> 'Perhaps your grandmother was Turkish after all!' the taxi driver yells after me as I back out of the cab and cross the

> road.
> 'Perhaps,' I yell back and a small, tight laugh escapes my lips as he shakes his head then moves into the glow of the night-time traffic. (8)

Where do you come from? This is a question that those of us who come from migrant and refugee families – even though we and even our parents might have been born in Australia – are used to being asked. In Australia, it is a common question and most of us answer with some reference to our ancestral birthplace. 'My parents are Sicilian, but I was born here,' is my stock answer. For Conway-Herron knowing where you come from means more than just knowing the name of your birthplace or your parents' birthplace, it means knowing and understanding your history. For her a sense of self, of place, of belonging depends on coming to terms with history and with the stories that have shaped us as individuals and as nations. Both the ones we choose to tell and the ones we try to hide or forget.

*Beneath the Grace of Clouds* tells the story of three extraordinary women, each one forced to confront the challenges resulting from our violent colonial history. These women could have become victims; certainly other people, mostly men, often had more power over their lives than they did, but they never give up.

This is a hybrid novel: part fact, part fiction. We are told before we begin the novel that this is 'a work of fiction', but one of the three narratives that interweave through the novel is written in the first person voice of autobiography. The character and the author share the same name. What is fiction and what is fact? Conway-Herron is skillfully playing with our desire to know the truth about history, about life, and in so doing forces us to question the histories and the stories that we have inherited.

The other two narratives, while based on extensive archival research, are clearly fiction. One is the story of Elizabeth, an English woman who came out as a convict on the First Fleet and the other of Booron, a Wallamatagul woman, living in and around Sydney cove in the 1780s. These two narratives are written in the third person but their voices are just as strong and individual as Janie's. By capturing the detail of the women's everyday lives, their desires and their griefs, Conway-Herron transports us into their worlds.

We meet Booron in 1787 when she is a young girl in a hurry to grow up. The adult women of her clan have left her in charge of a younger child while they go fishing. Instead of watching the child, she watches the women and dreams of the day she will be old enough to go with them. The child playing on his own nearly drowns. In a poignant passage that anticipates much of what is yet to come, one of the older women says to her:

> If you're to become a big woman, a spiritual woman, then the safety of everyone must be uppermost in your mind. Everyone has spirit-life that belongs to the country; you must look after Buladeri's life as if it is your own. You must never forget him, not even in your dreams. (14)

We follow Booron as the impact of white settlement on her people and her country becomes increasingly evident. Soon disease is rife and many are dying. When Booron gets sick, her family carry her into the white

settlement hopeful the 'ghosts' who have bought the disease can save Booron's life. Her life is saved and for a while she lives among the colonists, even meeting and becoming 'friends' with Elizabeth, but her first responsibility is to her people and her land and she knows she must leave:

> Out of sight of the settlement, Booron stops her canoe and in one swift movement pulls the dress she has been wearing over her head and throws it high in the air. It billows out and flutters as the wind catches at it. Then the deep blue of the river swallows it up as it slowly sinks below the surface, looking like some strange jellyfish as the water closes over it.
> Booron looks across at the country which has been part of her people's lifeblood forever and whispers to the spirits promising them that she will return each turning of the season to take care of country ... (144)

Elizabeth is a child in London when her narrative opens. Though times are difficult and many are destitute, her parents are making just enough money to live but everything changes when Elizabeth's father dies and she has to go to work. Along with her friend Constance, Elizabeth begins to steal things from the factory to raise money to fulfill their dream to one day own a clothing shop. Elizabeth is caught and sentenced to 'seven years transportation beyond the seas'. Elizabeth's narrative traces her life as a convict woman in the colony. We see her struggle with loneliness, with exploitation, with various other hardships; we see through her eyes the life in the settlement and the relationship with indigenous Australians:

> Elizabeth suddenly understands. Booron doesn't want them here, not any of them, not even her, and the friendship she has seen as being special, is revealed in all its frailty. Nothing she can do can change the fact that her presence in this country is unwelcome. (111)

In the first chapter of Janie's narrative, she is a child surrounded by both her grandmothers. Her maternal grandmother Lossie is descendant from Norwegians. Her paternal grandmother tells everyone she is French, but some 20 years after her death, Janie discovers that her grandmother's real name was Elise March, not Alivis de Faye, and that she was not French. We follow Janie as she grows up in 1950s, 60s and 70s Australia, as she begins to question her background, as she becomes aware of racism and gets involved in Rock against Racism, as she increases her awareness of the plight of indigenous Australians and the consequences of our colonial past:

> My search for my dad's mother's background began in earnest in 1981, almost a decade after she died and a year after I had moved to Sydney from Melbourne ... The search was driven by a sense of guilt as I began to understand the consequences of the history of my family's migration to Australia. The way the comforts of my own life that I had so easily taken for granted were so deeply intertwined with the dispossession and fragmentation of the lives of many of the Aboriginal people I had met. (49)

Janie's narrative moves between her research, her activism and her personal life as a mother, wife, lover and friend. But these three aspects are

never separate for Janie; the personal is always political and political often becomes very personal. This narrative also provides an insight into Rock against Racism, an important movement in Australia in the 80s that has rarely been written about.

In *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, Conway-Herron takes on the difficult and complex issues arising from Australia's colonial history but this is not a novel that wallows in guilt or blame. By situating indigenous and non-indigenous stories and histories alongside each other, Conway-Herron highlights our interdependence.

In 2006 in the middle of some of the history debates that arose around Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Stella Clarke wrote in *The Australian*:

> Australian history will never be neat, but it will always be needed. Let's not imagine that it is only professional historians or politicians for that matter, who approach it with integrity. It's too important to be left to either. It was lived, made and messed up by people like us, and our best literary artists can do an excellent job of reminding us of this: it's everybody's.

Clarke may well have been talking about *Beneath the Grace of Clouds.* In this novel, history is lived, made and messed up by people just like us. It reminds us to consider the difficulties faced by both the indigenous Australians and the English, especially those who arrived as convicts. By combining the historical narratives with the contemporary ones it also reminds us that mistakes of history have consequences in the present and it is our responsibility to act for change.

Janie Conway-Herron is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Southern Cross University. *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* is her first novel. It is an engaging, brave and sensitively rendered work that challenges each of us to question the stories we have inherited.

*Dr Enza Gandolfo is a lecturer in Creative Writing at Victoria University. Her most recent book is a novel,* Swimming *(Vanark Press 2009). Enza is also the reviews editor for* TEXT.

---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Super Modern Prayer Book

## *review by Alison Clifton*


Susan Bradley Smith
*Super Modern Prayer Book*
Salt, London, 2010
ISBN 9781844714490
Pb 112pp AUD24.95

Susan Bradley Smith had my admiration and attention right away with her latest collection of poetry, *Super Modern Prayer Book*. Why? The front cover of the book features a recommendation from Jill Jones, the well-respected Adelaide poet. The poetry inside more than lives up to expectations: Smith's work is fluid, warm, and dark. Here and there golden hope glimmers, but mostly rage, disappointment and grief stain scarlet the black canvas of Smith's poetry. Sensual and speakable, despite its often taboo subject matter and sometimes profane language, *Super Modern Prayer Book* is richly feminist writing at its best. Sleek, nuanced, intimately communicative, Smith's poetry is the work of a writer comfortable with her womanhood.

The most impressive aspect of this poetry is Smith's foregrounding of what in lesser hands might have become back story. Although this is lyric poetry, more often than not there is narrative here. As each poem progresses, the elements of the story emerge to colour the monologue with detail. Indeed, Smith shows great skill in her selectivity and positioning of details. 'Sea monster', the stand-out poem and the one which opens the collection, begins with the realisation that 'You will never have to loan / her money or pretend you / like her husband …' (3). However, the touchingly familiar, humorously-inflected notions of mothering a daughter – advising 'which / G.P. has the nicer touch for / Pap smears' (3) – soon give way to horrific, plainly-stated details. It soon emerges that 'your' daughter went to a party and took a pill 'from a boy, who had two / others standing behind him, / slyly enjoying the strain of / their cocks in their jeans' (3). These boys 'forced / themselves into all of her / three holes, for fun, it was / such a laugh' (3). She took her own life afterwards, swimming out with strong strokes from the shore to drown or be taken by a shark. And now you sit in the courtroom next to her best friend – she too was

caught by the boys, who 'played their golf again' (4). They told her to shut up, but she would not until this moment when the boys are given community service: '*Fine young men undone by drink / and circumstance*' (4). This material could be maudlin in the wrong hands, could seem too over-the-top, details exaggerated until they are unbelievable, if it were not for the knowledge of cases such as the murder of Leigh Leigh in a small beachside community in New South Wales in 1989 (the play and film entitled *Blackrock* were based on this crime). Under the Melbourne poet's deft hand, the powerful verse emerges from the murkiness. Shifting from a lyric style to paragraph form in a mid-poem caesura, 'Sea monsters' shows Smith's trademark skilled handling of the interplay of form and content.

It is not always easy to digest the misery and despair only briefly lit by hope. A baby is left handicapped by illness (scarlet fever?) in 'The Scarlet series of true belief' (14), 'small baby coffins' haunt 'Good decisions also get you stuck in traffic' (96) and 'a coffin for a baby' leaves scars that cannot be erased from the skin of 'In the human way' (86). However, an infant girl prospers despite the distance between her father and mother in 'Love fuck theory' as the:

> love
> love
> love
> love

showered on the child by her mother nurtures the whispered chlorophyll 'promise of … / return' with which the poem concludes (84).

Here the green of growth and feminist thought plays off the red of blood, death and life; there the green and purple sash of the suffragette and the purple heart of the injured soldier encourage each other to feats of endurance. A sensitive writer, Smith is still capable of harshness and hardness in equal measure, but her humanity lightens the bleakness. One is reminded of the Japanese word 'kokoro', which means 'the thinking and feeling heart'.

Not only is the poetry shaded by light and colour, but there is also a musical theme running through the collection adding to the cardiac rhythms of the work. The words of Green Day's *American Idiot* (2004), a protest against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, storm the entrenched lines of 'As far as I can tell there is nothing wrong with me: fugue for dying soldiers to sing out loud, as well as being a cento, for Charlie' (77). The title of this poem may be less than catchy and its original content sparse – with Smith making use of large swathes of Billie Joe Armstrong's lyrics as well as appropriating her main character from the music video to 'Wake Me up when September Ends' – but the juxtaposition of snatches of sneering lyrics from lead-singer Billie Joe Armstrong with the mixed contempt and desperation in the voice of the girlfriend left behind by the GI is effective.

The musical theme is continued when a woman defined more by her status as an aging wife and mother than by her teaching position at a university realises that 'Nick / Cave writes songs about women like me …' in 'Good decisions also get you stuck in traffic' (97), while UK rock group Primal Scream light up the 'pink ipod' possessed by a woman indecisive about forsaking London life and taking a job in Australia in 'Someone else's cool' (88). The narrator of this poem looks into a kaleidoscope of past promise, present indecision and future potential for the young woman,

once again delineating the sorts of details poets who court obscurity would omit.

If you are a reader who warms to a confessional style devoid of the pathetic undertones that can mar such poetry; if you are the sort of person who delights in the musicality of language; if you are the kind of listener who overhears more than might be considered healthy … if any of these descriptions suit you, then Smith's *Super Modern Prayer Book* should be on your bookshelf, its words lingering in colourful thought-images in your head.

*Alison Clifton is a PhD student at the University of Queensland. Her thesis is in the field of contemporary British poetry and is entitled: 'Faith and Politics in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill'. Alison writes poetry reviews for* M/C Reviews: Words *and her other interests include contemporary Japanese fiction.*

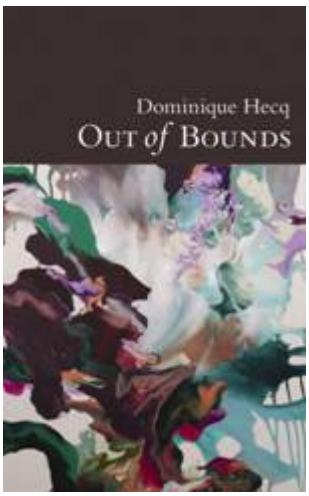
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Incarnadine words and incarnate worlds

## *review by Helen Gildfind*




Dominique Hecq
*Out of Bounds*
re.press, Prahan, 2009
ISBN 9780980544039
ISBN-ebook 9780980666533
Pb 85pp AUD20.00

Dominique Hecq is an award-winning, Belgian-born and Melbourne-based, poet, fiction writer, playwright and academic. *Out of Bounds* is her fourth book of poetry, and is made up of three extended poems: 'The Gaze of Silence', 'Out of Bounds' and 'The Silence of the Gaze'. [note 1] The opening pages of Hecq's collection acknowledge her poems' references to specific works by Baudelaire, Woolf, Bach, Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Mahler. (Hecq's other expertise lies in psychoanalysis and literary studies.) Hecq thus immediately signals that an intertextual reading of her work will allow readers to engage with her writing in a specific way, and perhaps in a way that most closely evokes her own imaginative universe. The following, however, offers a response to Hecq's collection from the perspective of someone who is unfamiliar with these references.

What is most immediately striking in *Out of Bounds* is Hecq's masterful display of poetic technique. 'The Gaze of Silence' and 'The Silence of the Gaze' bracket the collection. These two series of poems shift between the bold images of compelling riddle-like tercets ('Griffon wings / A claw in the mouth / Scream page') and short, dense prose poems. The prose poems see the mythical-psychological meet the social and bodily in an individual woman's struggle to survive the 'clutter of tongues' that defines her experience of being a migrant, a woman, a mother and a spouse in a world 'short of words'. Hecq's sometimes terrifying scrambles of blunt statement and alliterative play powerfully evokes this clutter:

> She wants to go. She wants to stay. As in bleiben
> blubbering blancheur des mots blackness of things blurring
> of boundaries bewitching soundaries in Babel instead of

> that blundering babbelchose to be – is a belle. She hangs on
> to the word word. (25)

The reader is immersed in the protagonist's search for a home in words and (as) a home in a new world, Australia. We witness her attempt to 'penfect' herself with the gunshot stutters of a second language, where fluid and coherent words become broken into the single separate entities of word word word, 'sounding, unsounding, resounding the world'.

Initially, the prose poems' references to a mysterious woman of the mountains (and to someone – the reader? – called 'you') are obscure:

> High up in the mountains she drops and falls in a mirror
> you call a lake. Her eyes are split and so is her face. Her
> skin is inside out. Burning. Freezing ... She is all shivers
> and sweat. Her voice booms in her chest. Her head. Husks.
> Her heartbeat is strong. Is weak. Is no more. (19)

This prose is preceded by the calm restraint of a beautiful tercet ('Washed out Moon / Milk letters spilled / in mid air song') which signals a maternal theme and whose contrast in tone painfully emphasises the prose passage's evocation of the violent oscillation between life and death (being, and making, an other) that is childbirth, a trauma compounded for the woman by a 'foreign tongue' telling her that 'she is not prepared'. The brutal images in these passages, the violent contrasts in tone and pace, and Hecq's pounding of her readers with powerful verbs (the horror of a head that has become a 'husk'; the horror of a head 'husking') and the breathlessness evoked by the breaking down of lines and sentences typify how Hecq's poetic landscape – where things constantly split, burst, crack and splinter – seduces the reader to return again and again to enter and decipher the world she has so carefully wrought into, or from, words.

The paired structure of tercet and prose poem repeats in 'The Gaze of Silence' and 'The Silence of the Gaze', until the end of each series where the final should-be tercet explodes into a cacophony of words, scattering down the page. The symmetry within these two series, and the way they bracket the middle series of poems ('Out of Bounds') gives readers a means to track the woman's evolution from wildness to wisdom, from reading to writing, from being in the gaze to being outside of it, from sounding spaces to fleshing spaces, from being short of words, to short of worlds.

'Out of Bounds', by contrast, has no dominating structure. This series attaches flesh and face and place to the mysterious hints of narrative in the first and final series: 'She' becomes 'I' (for we are now moving through an 'I'land') just as 'He' (whom we meet initially as a hawk-like man, or a phoenix) becomes 'Charles'. Hecq's shift from the disciplined restraint of her framing works, into the formless free-fall of this middle series, sees her play with language in a new way. Flurries of a hybrid language burst onto the pages (*'Chante, alors, Viola! Sing, petit singe, petty sin!'*) in a contest against SPEECH that speaks with the capitalised authority of POWER, a power that seems associated with men (and religion) who 'sneer' and 'snarl' and 'snort', men who abuse and must be fled from. She flees to Australia where the glamour of a new world turns into the bland reality of Tullamarine:

> not the land, the lush island, the harsh inland I had
> fathomed in my thoughts, but a dull and wayward sea of

> concrete and concreted paddocks. Padded land ... a
> padlocked land. (45)

Again, language cascades and cavorts, giving birth to itself, and the sheer momentum of Hecq's play with sound alone pulls readers into her world. Readers walk through the 'veined' city streets of Melbourne, witnessing the protagonist's struggle to relate to her land, her spouse and her child, paralleled always by her struggle to master English ('There are things I can't name yet, but I'll borrow your words, your rules, your pens') and her wavering confidence at ever being able to do so ('Half way through the sentence I sense a *flew* bumps ... I can now hear the thump of things unsaid').

*Out of Bounds*, pulses with life. The beauty and brutality of its images, its meticulously considered formal structure and the complexity of Hecq's concern with the relationship between language and being, beguiles readers to return to her poems – repeatedly – in order to piece together the complex and compelling jigsaw of one woman's internal and external worlds, worlds which she seems to reconcile in her final realisation: *'Certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.'* While the reader mines Hecq's work trying to identify – like her protagonist – this single, solid 'thing itself', Hecq's writing shows us that the power of language lies less in what words can say than in what worlds of experience their music can evoke.

**Notes**

1. 'The Gaze of Silence' (previously published by The SideWaLK Collective); 'Out of Bounds' (previously published in *Meanjin,* and winner of the 1998 Melbourne Fringe Festival Prize for Outstanding Writing and Spoken Word Performance), and 'The Silence of the Gaze' (previously published by *Slope,* online). return to text

*Helen Gildfind has published poems, short stories, essays and book reviews in* Island, Southerly, Westerly, Hecate, Antipodes, Idiom, Veranda, Voiceworks, TEXT, Traffic, antiTHESIS, Australian Women's Book Review *and* Poetrix. *She was the Emerging Writer in Residence at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Perth in 2009.*

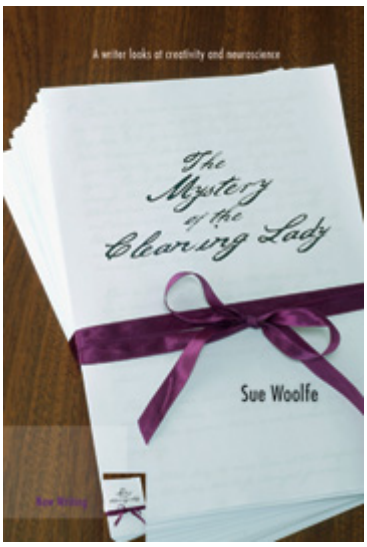
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Agency and the Dispossessed

## *review by Dianne Morris*




Sue Woolfe
*The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady*
University of Western Australia Press 2007
ISBN: 978 1 920694 968
Pb 145pp AUD24.95

There are many books about writing. They come in all forms and guises. Some are cheerfully 'how to', others are more reflective and scholarly. *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady* is one of the latter, but the big difference is that this is a book about *not* writing.

In the preface Sue Woolfe describes her journey as 'the investigation of a novelist baffled by her own creative processes and seeking to understand them' (ix). She is looking into areas of science – not her field – and she offers apologies for the possible naivety of her interpretations. To comprehend the task she faced, it helps to first appreciate Woolfe's way of writing. Her method is to begin scribbling with no plan:

> Scribbling for me is work, a time of musing and imaginative meandering and play...I know from experience that I must write, word after word, page after page, on and on and on, about anything at all that comes to mind – notions, snatches of dialogue I hear or imagine, descriptions of landscapes, moods, smells, sounds and their impact, sensations of touch, and details of research that obsess me – until something shifts. (2)

Woolfe eschews any sort of planning of a manuscript because she deems it too Western and prescriptive and withering to her imagination. For her, the discovery – through her scribbling – of a 'peak shift' (12) idea too early can lead to the plot taking over. In order to preserve the directionless malleability that she considers so important to her work, Woolfe summons all her will to manage her anxiety and trust that the deep themes will evolve with the writing, not before it.

But in the early stages of writing *The Secret Cure* Woolfe knew the despair of coming unstuck. Unable to progress by her own methods, she began to question not only her worth as a writer but also as a teacher of creative writing. Her knowledge of the writing process seemed to be failing her and she only felt comfortable teaching what she knew. A black hole of plot had overpowered and numbed her scribbling, in much the same way as the actual initium for the story – the knowledge that her own brother had died in an institution aged seven of suspected autism – must have overpowered her parents with grief and unanswered questions.

At this point, we realize that if not for that block this book might never have been written. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, my grandmother might have said.
This book is part memoir, part research – she ranges far and wide to find primary and secondary sources as evidenced by a four page bibliography and seven pages of notes – part philosophy – every finding is weighed up and accepted or refuted according to her own experience – and part exhilarating displays of curiosity and keen intellect. And yet, despite all this, the voice in which she writes is a quietly intimate one, leaving the reader with the feeling of having had a relaxed conversation with Woolfe or of being privy to her thoughts.

The chapters move through an exploration of creativity and also creativity as 'sickness', other writers' and artists' methods of invoking their own creativity (including a similar study for similar reasons by artist and psychoanalyst Joanna Field in *On Not Being Able to Paint*), the composition of the 'the mind' (Antonio Damasio and his exciting theory of somatic markers interacting in a 'body-minded' brain gave me a thrill of recognition), the engendering of voice, memory and creative states, loose and tight construing, consciousness and brain-mapping and the journey that leads to the final discovery the novel's themes.

It was a long way from 1998, the year Woolfe's novel ground to a halt, to a phone call in October 2001 about a relatively minor matter concerning Hans Asperger's 'pivotal paper on Asperger's Syndrome' (117):

> In some conversations, a writer senses a great personal significance, and this was one: I'd heard ...the centre of the novel. I began to see an overview for all the disparate characters and incidents and scenes... (118)

The vast jigsaw puzzle was animated into new understanding. One more little piece in a scribbled unrelated thought was all it took to at last see the way forward.

> The experience of discovering the themata is a somatically felt joy. The very rhythm of the words at this stage is often accompanied by imaginary music – in particular, deep, resounding organ music, possibly indicative of my synaesthesia.(124)

That Sue Woolfe is a unique human being is imprinted not only in the quote above, but on every page of this book. Indeed the book itself is unique. Small and yet packed with deep insights into the neurological processes of creating, it will have writers and readers returning to its thought- provoking observations time after time.

I met Sue Woolfe at a Writer's Festival where she was on a panel. At the end of the session as the clapping began there seemed to be an expression

of pure openness on her face as she looked directly out into the audience. It occurred to me that she was also giving back as well as receiving acknowledgement. And so it is with this book.

'To my students' says the dedication page.

'I hope this inspires you,' she inscribed the book for me.

It certainly did.

*Dianne Morris completed an MA in Creative Writing at Griffith University in 2011. She has written book reviews for* M/C Reviews: Culture and the Media *and published short stories in two editions of* One Book Many Brisbanes.

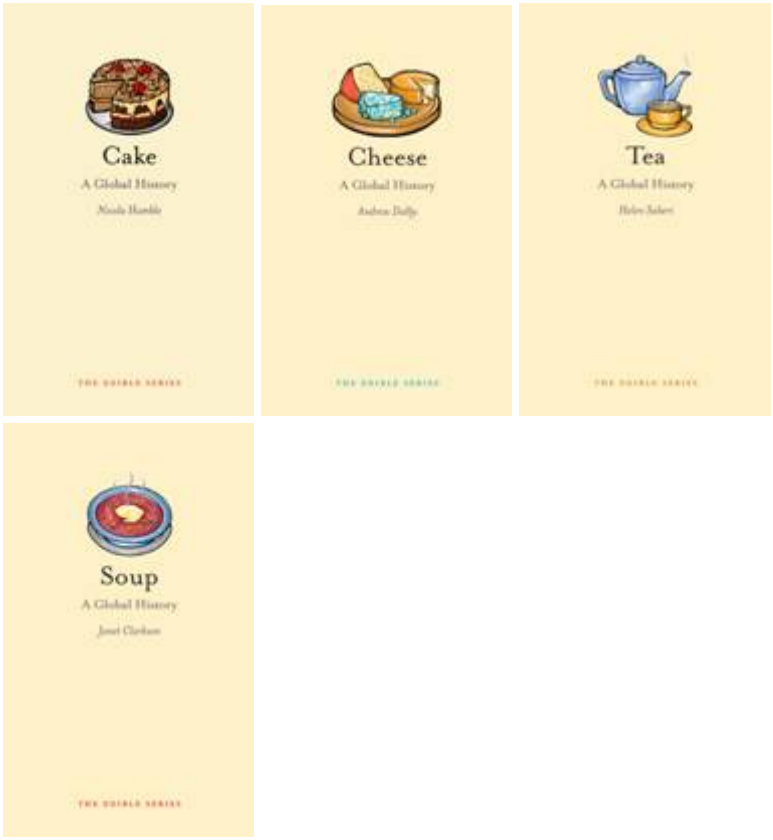
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Four gastronomic microhistories

## *review by Donna Lee Brien*




Nicola Humble
*Cake: A Global History*
Reaktion Books 2010
ISBN 978 1 86189 648 3
hb 144pp AUD24.95

Andrew Dalby
*Cheese: A Global History*
Reaktion Books 2009
ISBN 978 1 86189 523 3
hb 128pp AUD24.95

Helen Saberi
*Tea: A Global History*
Reaktion Books 2010
ISBN 978 1 86189 776 3
hb 184pp AUD24.95

Janet Clarkson
*Soup: A Global History*
Reaktion Books 2010
ISBN 978 1 86189 774 9
hb 152pp AUD24.95

In the early 1990s, I discovered, and became highly enamoured of, the form of narrative history writing known as microhistory. The term is not widely utilised in Australia, with no publication classified as such in the Australian National Library's catalogue. Indeed, Stuart McIntyre's detailed survey of the Australian discipline of history for the Australian Academy of the Humanities report, *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century*, only mentions the term once—describing how in Australia 'local history has metamorphosed into microhistory' (McIntyre 1998). Yet microhistory's focus on such subjects as single localities, events, lives, families and products has long been able to illuminate broader culture. This aspect of microhistory, together with its writing style—in which engaging and compelling storytelling (often termed "narrative" in discussions of the genre) is prominent—is, indeed—although the resulting texts are not described as such—attracting more and more readers and writers.

Reader interest is due, in large part, I suggest, to the microhistorian's ability to fashion fascinating and even dramatic stories from data that can often appear uninspiring in its raw form. This is especially so in specialist single subject areas. Currently in print there are, for instance, highly engaging microhistories of rubbish, coal, plastics, toothpicks, chloroform, tulips and shipping containers. One of the booming areas of the single product subject microhistory is that of individual food products.

Microhistorians are usually interested in the ordinary, rather than the great or exceptional that is traditionally the subject of historical narrative. A well known example is Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (published in English in 1983), a very readable story of sixteenth century characters; namely, Bertrande of Artigat and the charismatic impostor who claimed to be her long-gone husband and lived with her for four years until he was exposed. The book reached a relatively broad audience and this was expanded when the celebrated French film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (1982) (on which Davis was a consultant) was released outside France and was so popular it was remade in English. [1] Microhistorians share their interest in the quotidian with the social historians of the so-called History from Below movement.

In food history terms, there is nothing more ordinary than the everyday food people eat, and books on these unprepossessing subjects are making interesting reading, so much so that, at times, they are topping the bestseller lists. In my own library, I have studies I would class as microhistories on pigs, goats, cheese, pasta, bananas, oysters, lobsters, salt, spices, curry, potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, sweets, ice cream, honey, chocolate, tea, coffee, wine, beer, whiskey and bottled spring water. Books such as Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (1997), *Salt: A World History* (2002) and *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (2006) and Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (2005) have all reached sales figures that have surpassed many other nonfiction texts and made writing careers for their authors. These, and other writers, have, moreover, described their work in terms that greatly surpass the significance of the single food item, with Kurlansky describing such food writing as 'about agriculture, about ecology, about man's relationship with nature, about the climate, about nation-building, cultural struggles, friends and enemies, alliances, wars, religion. It is about memory and tradition and, at times, even about sex' (Kurlanski 2003: 1). The microhistories I listed above each deal with some, many or all of the above topics. They also move beyond these topics to range into subject areas such as diet and health, the media,

environmental sustainability and food security. At heart, however, most of the texts I have read start from a historical perspective.

*Cake: A Global History* (Humble 2010) *Cheese: A Global History* (Dalby 2009), *Tea: A Global History* (Saberi 2010) and *Soup: A Global History* (Clarkson 2010), are four titles from Reaktion Press's delectable Edible series. I chose these to review from a wide range of series titles that include *Caviar* by Nichola Fletcher, *Chocolate* by Sarah Moss and Alexander Badenoch, *Curry* by Colleen Taylor Sen, *Dates* by Nawal Nasrallah, *Hamburger* by Andrew F. Smith, *Hot Dog* by Bruce Kraig, *Ice Cream* by Laura B. Weiss, *Lobster* by Elisabeth Townsend, *Milk* by Hannah Velten, *Pancake* by Ken Albala, *Pie* by Janet Clarkson. *Pizza* by Carol Helstosky, *Potato* by Andrew F. Smith, *Sandwich* by Bee Wilson, *Spices* by Fred Czarra, and *Whiskey* by Kevin R. Kosar. I have nothing but praise for the books that make up this wonderful series, each of which is quite different, and shows that the publishers encouraged their authors to engage with the product on their own terms, but each of which contributes to a series of a consistently high standard. I am not alone in this assessment, with individual books praised highly in (the mostly UK) reviews and the series winning a special commendation in the prestigious 2010 André Simon Food and Drink Awards.

The approach of each, as the subtitles suggest, moves outside a narrow Western focus and despite their concise length (all less than 200 pages), the information included is detailed and interesting, even for a reader like myself who is familiar with other work on these topics. While the general standard of the information is of the highest scholarly standards, the writing is accessible, and the production of each book is nothing short of beautiful, making these highly desirable volumes for readers outside of the food history area. Each is published in hardcover format, with the series marked by an elegant cream slipcover with a coloured drawing of the subject. Each volume is lavishly illustrated throughout with high quality images that illustrate and enhance the text: *Cake* has 53 illustrations, 31 in colour; *Soup* has 60, 37 in colour; *Cheese* has 60, 40 in colour; and *Tea* has 77, with 62 of these in colour. Many of the illustrations are historical or archival images that provide a rich source of reference materials for the food historian or those engaged in other cultural enquiry. Each volume in the series moreover includes a menu of choices for further reading on the topic—a list of references, select bibliography, and a list of relevant websites and associations.

It is clear that each of these books is written with real passion, by authors with both personal and scholarly interest in the subject, and such single subject microhistories definitely provide possible avenues for academic creative writers who wish to pursue popular publication. *Cake: A Global History*'s author, Nicola Humble, for instance, is Professor of English Literature at Roehampton University (UK), and author of an important book on British cookbooks, *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation of British Food* (2005), as well as books on women's cultures: *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001) and *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (1993) (the latter with Kimberley Reynolds). Humble begins her dissertation on cake with a personal memory (of her fifth year birthday cake—a train), a creative nonfiction narrative which focuses the discussion to follow on how 'Cakes are very strange things, producing a range of emotional responses far out of keeping with their culinary significance' (8). This is followed by a fascinating discussion of the difference between cakes, bread and biscuits, a survey of iconic cakes

from around the world which includes the Australian lamington, a history of baking in different cultures, the rituals and symbolism associated with cakes, famous cakes in literature, and a concluding chapter on postmodern cakes that includes cupcakes and representations of cakes in contemporary art. I devoured this volume in one sitting and then later returned to Humble's thoughtful analysis of what makes a cake a cake—as opposed to other food items made from similar ingredients—and her detailed discussion of important place that baking occupies in American culture.

Based in France, Andrew Dalby is well regarded in food history circles for his many books on culinary topics from the ancient world including prestigious award winners such as *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (1996) (winner of the Runciman Award, an annual award offered by the Anglo-Hellenic League, and *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (2000a), which was named Food Book of the Year by the Guild of Food Writers. In *Cheese: A Global History*, Dalby brings this considerable erudition to a comprehensive and entertaining study of cheese. This he divides into a discussion of the various types of cheese and how their names have changed through time, followed by cheese's history, making and consuming—all of which are tackled from a historical perspective that draws a great deal from literature in its telling. Dalby also explains why cheese is important, in that it provided a way of transforming milk, a good but unstable source of protein, into a reliable food resource. His chapter on cheese making deals with continuity and variety in cheese making from the Cyclops in *The Odyssey* to modern times, discussing the various types of milk used (sheep, goat, cow, buffalo), to how it is curdled, treated, flavoured, aged, stored and traded. Until I read this text, I did not realize just how widely cheese has been used as a core culinary ingredient throughout Western history, and I especially enjoyed the series of historical recipes Darby selected for inclusion.

Helen Saberi, author of *Tea: A Global History*, also has a significant publication profile. She is the author of *Noshe Djan: Afghan Food and Cookery* (1986) and co-author of *The Road to Vindaloo: Curry Cooks and Curry Books* (2008) with David Burnett. As research director, she assisted the late, great Alan Davidson for many years on his magnum opus, *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Jaine 2006), also co-authoring the microhistory, *Trifle* (2001),and co-editing the compilation *The Wilder Shores of Gastronomy: Twenty Years of the Best Food Writing from the journal Petits Propos Culinaires* (2002) with him. After defining and describing various forms of tea, the world's second most popular beverage after water, Saberi follows tea's story geographically from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, to the Middle East and Mediterranean and hence to the West, through India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Detailing the differences between white, yellow, green, oolong, black and puerh teas, Saberi also discusses the different grades of teas and provides a glossary of tasting terms that is just as detailed and descriptive as those used with wine. Tea's rise and fall from exotic and costly beverage of high status to the solace of the masses is traced, as are its traditional uses in such ceremonies as the Japanese Zen tea ceremony. The current Western fashion for Bubble tea from Taiwan and versions of Indian Chai tea, and the market for organic, fair trade and origin-specific teas are not neglected, and herbal teas—which are not teas at all, but tisanes—are also discussed. The familiar meals that are centred around drinking tea—morning, afternoon and high tea—are described, as are various methods of preparation and the invention and almost universal uptake of the tea bag. Australian billy tea gets a mention, as does ongoing medical research into tea's therapeutic properties. Like the other volumes in this series, this is a book that

manages to pack in a great deal of information without skirting over any elements of the discussion.

Australian-based food historian Janet Clarkson admits in the beginning of *Soup: A Global History* that she panicked a little when she found herself committed to writing an entire book on soup, especially as—unlike many other food products—she found it not inherently sexy, extravagant, mysterious, exotic, cute or sporty. Yet, it was in its very familiarity, its universality and ubiquity, that Clarkson found soup's 'claim to fame' (9). The author of numerous culinary encyclopedia entries as well as the books *Menus from History: Historic Meals and Recipes for Every Day of the Year* (2009) and *Pie: A Global History* (2008), for the Edible series, took a thematic approach to her study, beginning with the origins of soup, and then progressing to what she classified as medicinal (including a fascinating dissertation on soup as comfort food and its role as medicine), charitable (soup kitchens and the role soup has played in feeding those in need), portable (soups as preserved and concentrated foods for travel and what this has meant for exploration, colonization and war) and global soups. In the latter, Clarkson posits that 'Soup is unequivocally a human cultural phenomenon, not a geographic or political entity' (84) and shows how widespread soup really is. She finishes with a glorious chapter on noteworthy soups that details a series of extravagant (the soups of kings and other wealthy diners), aphrodisiac, unusual (cold and sweet soups), dangerous (poisoned) and even sad soups (as in the 19th century mania for turtle soup), a list that certainly challenged my idea of soups' comfortable familiarity.

Like many others who enjoy food history, I like not only reading about food, but am often inspired to cook from these volumes. In my research for this review, I indeed attempted a number of the recipes from each of the Edible series volumes and found them clear and reliable. I was indeed able to construct an entire dinner party menu from them, and served Watercress Soup and Damper (from *Soup*), Viking Pies of cooked lamb, cheese, currants and pine nuts (from *Cheese*), and Hazelnut and Raspberry Cake (from *Cake*) with a Jasmine Tea Sorbet and hot Spiced Tea (both from *Tea*).

These books certainly took me on a delicious and informative journey. For writers and teachers of writing of all genres, I believe these and the other books in this series provide a wealth of information and fascinating detail that will be not only very useful in a range of writing contexts, but also inspiring in terms of publishing possibilities. My favourite of these books? That's as difficult to choose as the dishes I made from them.

**Note**

1. The French film, released with English subtitles as *The Return of Martin Guerre* in 1982, reflected the content of Davis' book, although the 1993 Hollywood remake, *Sommersby* (Amiel 1993), starring Jodie Foster and Richard Gere, added a happy ending. return to text

**Works cited**

Amiel, Jon (dir) 1993 *Sommersby*. Film. Warner Home Video, Canada return to text

Burnett, David and Helen Saberi 2008 *The Road to Vindaloo: Curry Cooks and Curry Books*. Totnes: Prospect Books return to text

Clarkson, Janet 2009 *Menus from History: Historic Meals and Recipes for Every Day of the Year*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing return to text

Collingham, Lizzie 2005 *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*. London: Chatto & Windus return to text

Dalby, Andrew 2000a *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press return to text

Dalby, Andrew 2000b *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World*. London: Routledge

Dalby, Andrew 1996 *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece*. London: Routledge return to text

Davidson, Alan with Helen Saberi (eds) 2002 *The Wilder Shores of Gastronomy: Twenty Years of the Best Food Writing from the Journal Petits Propos Culinaires*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press return to text

Davis, Natalie Zemon 1983 *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press return to text

Humble, Nicola 2005 *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation of British Food*. London: Faber return to text

Humble, Nicola 2001 *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press return to text

Jaine, Tom (ed) 2006 *The Oxford Companion to Food by Alan Davidson*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press return to text

Kurlansky, Mark 1997 *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin return to text

Kurlansky, Mark 2002 *Salt: A World History*. New York: Random House return to text

Kurlansky, Mark 2003 *Choice Cuts: A Selection of Food Writing from around the World*. New York: Jonathan Cape return to text

Kurlansky, Mark 2006 *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*. New York: Random House return to text

McIntyre, Stuart 1998 'History', *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st. Century*. Prepared by the Australian Academy of the Humanities for the Australian Research Council Discipline Research Strategies. Canberra: National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Australian Government Publishing Services return to text

Reynolds, Kimberley and Nicola Humble 1993 *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf return to text

Saberi, Helen 1986 [2000] *Noshe Djan: Afghan Food and Cookery*. Totnes: Prospect Books return to text

Sabieri, Helen and Alan Davidson 2001 *Trifle.* Totnes: Prospect return to text

Vigne, Daniel (dir) 1982 *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (rel. as *The Return of Martin Guerre*). Film. La Société Française De Production Cinématographique, La Société De Production Des Films Marcel Dassault and France Région 3, France return to text

*Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries and Director of Research in the School of Creative and Performing Arts, at CQUniversity, Australia. Donna is the Special Issues Editor of* TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, a Foundation Editorial Board member of* Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies *and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Her current research includes projects on the impact of Australian food writers and food writing.*

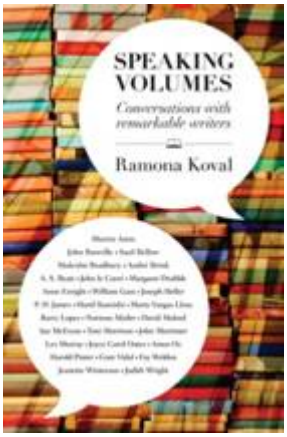
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Conversations with writers

## *review by Anneli Knight*




Ramona Koval
*Speaking Volumes: Conversations with remarkable writers*
Scribe, Melbourne, 2010
ISBN 9781921640612
Pb 417pp AUD35.00

Ramona Koval's *Speaking Volumes* offers an array of delights for the writer-reader. There are reflections on the writing process and the writerly life from some the world's most remarkable proponents of it; insights into intimate moments, political prisms and personal quirks through which these writers create their work; and it reveals, through Koval's deft handling, a remarkable execution and delivery of the art of the interview.

One might begin to wonder, at first glance of this book, whether writing is an activity tantamount to being imprisoned in a single cell block at Guantanamo Bay or being infected by a bout of the bird flu.

John Banville declares writing to be a 'hideous process' (344), one he equates to 'wading neck-deep in mud' (338), while Margaret Drabble speaks regretfully of the career she has dedicated her life to: 'Writing is an illness, I caught it by default when I was 21' (294).

PD James does little to redeem the profession, with her reflection: 'I think probably it's a good thing for a writer to have as much unhappiness as you can put up with when you are young' (108), while Mario Vargas Llosa's spin suggests a sliver of optimism: 'For a writer there can be no bad experience' (56).

It is Martin Amis who, preceding an acerbic denigration of book reviewers, brings the prospect of joyfulness to a writer's relationship with life: 'By definition, writers tend to be lovers of life – otherwise they wouldn't bother to adorn it, and order it, and give it moral and comic point on the page' (303).

Although many of Koval's interviews are close to a decade old (and several of them already published in her 2005 compilation *Tasting Life*

*Twice*, published by ABC Books), the themes she nudges these writers through are timeless, and the compilation fulfils her introductory promise:

> These interviews are ... spontaneous, the product of the alchemy of the moment, of intense preparation and a natural and compulsive curiosity, of voracious reading and delight in being completely immersed in the world and the work of the writer. (9)

Perhaps it is Koval's grounding in radio that gives her such talent for setting the scenes of her interviews with vivid descriptions of place and a strong contextual backdrop. Most memorably, this unfolds during her interview with Les Murray as the pair drive around his property in rural NSW and speak about the way the land has shaped his life, his family and his writing. He tells Koval he won't move from the place because he's: 'Too Aboriginal about it, I suppose. It's country, y'know?' (247).

The book provides lingering images from authors' personal lives, including Ian McEwan's explanation of the way in which he shares his 'office life' with his wife:

> Every few months, when I'm writing a book, when we find time – it's usually on holiday or at a weekend, on our very large Knoll sofa, the sort of sofa you can climb into, take your shoes off, with a glass of wine – I read to her, five, six, seven thousand words of where I've got to so far. It's the only way to say, well, this is what I'm about. (125)

And Jeanette Winterson's revelation that ever since her adopted mother burnt all her books when she was a child – in a bonfire in the backyard fuelled by paraffin – she began to memorise one new poem each week, a practice she maintains: 'So when the library outside of me had been destroyed, I replaced it with the library that was inside of me that no one could take away' (356).

Koval is equally nimble diving into the trenches to converse the politics of war, including Harold Pinter's views over the possibility of Milosevic receiving a fair trial (185); the opinions of Amos Oz about Jewish settlements in the occupied territories (151); and John le Carré (David Cornwell) speaking on the war on terror, of which he says: 'In the present war, we did everything wrong' (395).

The book also reveals unexpected quirks of character among writers, including Hanif Kureishi's matter-of-fact revelation that he never reads a book beyond the first 100 pages (373), and John Mortimer's delight that he has been enjoying his first glass of champagne at 6 o'clock every morning: 'ever since I could afford to have a glass of champagne' (112).

In this collection of interviews, Koval reveals her ability to blend a light personal touch with profound knowledge of each writer's work, and her clever questions lead to some unexpected responses. The single disappointment is the dearth of Australian writers represented among Koval's handpicked selection of those she deems remarkable.

*Anneli Knight is a freelance journalist, regular contributor to* The Age *and* Sydney Morning Herald *and co-author of* Flirting with Finance *(Fairfax Books). She is soon to complete a PhD in creative writing with*

*her novel set in the Kimberley, where she has spent much of her time over the past six years.*

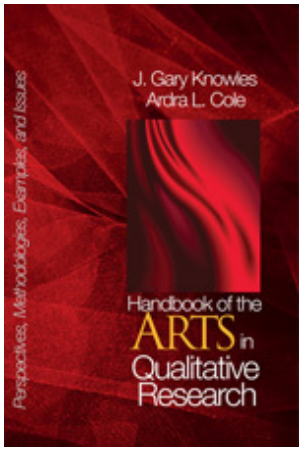
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Arts in qualitative research

## *review by Sandra Burr*




J Garry Knowles & Ardra L Cole, eds
*Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues*
Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008
ISBN 9781412905312
Hb 800pp AUD140.00

*Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues* seeks to explore the research possibilities that arise from the fusion of arts-based practice and social science research. Its existence speaks to an assumption that arts-based research is no longer an oxymoronic term regarded with suspicion by the academy. Indeed, as the editors state in the preface: 'The contents of the *Handbook* acknowledge the breadth of scholarship and burgeoning practice within a range of academic disciplines and contexts where the arts influence researching' (xi).This tome is not a defence of practice-led research but an exposition of the multiplicity of ways in which a diversity of art forms and art practices mesh with qualitative research methodologies to produce new knowledge and ways of understanding.

Sage scholarly research publications are reliably comprehensive and authoritative and this *Handbook is* no exception. I used the word 'tome' deliberately, for this is a dense work: six parts, 54 chapters, and 699 pages with more than 60 contributors including such luminaries as Norman K Denzin Elliot Eisner, Susan Finlay, Valerie J. Janesick, Stephanie Springgay, Graeme Sullivan, and many more. While the bulk of the scholarship is Canadian and North American, there are also contributions from scholars located in other parts of the world including Australians Tessa Moore (CQU), Karen Scott-Hoy (an independent scholar from South Australia) and Laura Brearley (RMIT). The depth and breadth of scholarship in this volume attests to an interest in and acceptance of art-as-research in academia. As the editors say this is '... a community project, one centered on the work of scholars committed to articulating the place of the arts in researching' (xv).

Each of the six sections contains a number of essays which are prefaced by a summary of contents. In Part I: Knowing, for example, Elliot Eisner discusses the notion of what it means to know with clarity and precision that would make enlightening reading for teachers and students alike. Part II: Methodologies, surveys a range of theoretical positions and approaches selected on the basis that '[T]here is much more to methodologies than method', illustrating the 'depth and complexity inherent in employing the arts as a means to knowledge advancement through research' (27). Shaun McNiff uses a recurring dream to demonstrate his contention that dreams are a unique way of knowing; Sandra Weber examines the different kinds of images available to researchers and lists ten reasons for using images in research including suggestions that images 'encourage embodied knowledge' and 'facilitate reflexivity in research design' (46); and Cole and Knowles, through the lens of personal experience, argue for a redefinition of inquiry that is more inclusive and representative of lived experience. Part II: Genres, surveys different manifestations of art-based inquiry in subsections that cover literary, performance, visual art, new media and folk and popular art forms. Tom Barone, for example, describes creative nonfiction and social research using three publications to illustrate his case. While Australian Karen Scott-Hoy (with co-author Carolyn Ellis) explores the links between research and autoethnography from a very personal standpoint relating the frustrations she experienced in her multiple roles as student/ researcher/teacher and mother. There are further stimulating essays on a range of media-as-research from paintings to photographs, to performance, quilts, blogs, zines and beyond.

The essays in Part III: Inquiry Processes, look at the pragmatics of doing this kind of research. They are not so much 'how to' as expositions by the authors on the ways that they do research, and how they marry their research practices with their creative outputs to produce a form of scholarly inquiry. Cancienne's essay is a particularly enlightening analysis of dance as research, while Prosser and Burke describe new ways of writing about childhood by adopting a childlike perspective. The illustrations in this essay are particularly engaging. Part IV: Issues and Challenges, tackles those area that are pivotal to creative inquiry: ethics, reflexivity, finances, aesthetics and, most interesting to higher degree by research scholars, is a very valuable essay by Knowles and Promislow discussing the use of arts methodology to create a thesis or dissertation. The final chapter looks at arts research across a broad range of disciplines including anthropology, psychology, education, nursing, social work, disability, business studies and sport.

In a recent review of this publication Baldacchino (2009) warns that 'making arts and design practice fit within the social sciences carries the risk of essentialism, where practices are reduced to identifiable methodological categories' (7). While he makes a valid point about the undesirability of this sort of narrowing of arts-based inquiry, this collection demonstrates that a natural affinity does exist between arts-based research and qualitative methodologies. I consider this *Handbook* to be a celebration; it clearly shows the many far-reaching and powerful ways that arts-based research contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the world. It not only reinforces the place of arts-based enquiry in the academy, it also provides inspiration for multiple ways for practitioners to cement and enhance the relationship between qualitative and arts-based inquiry. The publishers suggest that it is an essential resource for any scholar interested in qualitative research. I would go further and say it is an essential resource for those teaching arts-based inquiry methods to undergraduates. My students often complain that the set readings are too

dense, complex and jargon ridden. The *Handbook* would go a long way to demystifying arts-based research across the board. My review copy is already well thumbed, and the pages bookmarked and dog eared. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of knowledge in this discipline.

**Works cited**

Baldacchino, J. (2009) 'Opening the picture: On the political responsibility of arts-based research: A review essay'. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 10* (Review 3) at http://www.ijea.org/v10r3/ (accessed 4 March 2011).

*Sandra Burr has a PhD in creative writing. She is an adjunct professional associate at the University of Canberra where she teaches creative writing and creative research.*

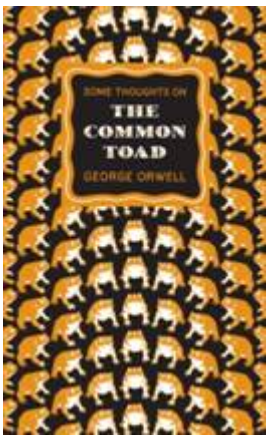
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Some thoughts on the Common Toad

## *review by Tessa Chudy*




George Orwell
*Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*
Penguin Books Classics, Penguin UK, London, 2010
ISBN 9780141191270
Pb 116pp AUD9.95

George Orwell is responsible for writing two of the most provocative and indelible books I have ever read – *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* – however these two books are only part of his output, Orwell also wrote a number of other novels and was a prolific essayist and journalist before his premature death at the age of forty-seven.

*Some Thoughts on the Common Toad* which has been re-issued as part of Penguin's Great Ideas series is a collection of essays which reveals Orwell as a clear-eyed, open-minded thinker and in sketches like the horrific 'Shooting an Elephant', a powerful writer. Orwell died in 1950 and the pieces collected here were written between 1940 and 1947.

The title essay 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad' begins by extolling the virtues of spring before attempting to reclaim the common toad from his reviled position as something grotesque and horrible. Orwell uses the toad as a metaphor of sorts in this essay in which he argued that the ability to appreciate spring/nature is a basic human right which he felt had become sublimated to the machine. It's a timeless sentiment and one that makes one wonder just what Orwell would make of the world today with its mobile phones, facebook, virtual realities, and other seemingly countless buffers between humans and nature.

The other essays include literary and art criticism. There is a complex reading of *Gulliver's Travels* in 'Politics vs Literature: An examination of Gulliver's Travels' where he explores the way that confounding ideologies such as Swift's pathological dislike of humanity can still create great art works. On a similar tack he demolishes Tolstoy in 'Lear, Tolstoy and The Fool' examining an obscure pamphlet written by Tolstoy in which he dismisses Shakespeare as 'no genius'. Orwell examines Tolstoy's life and

work and suggests that Tolstoy's hatred for Shakespeare was triggered by insecurity and a refusal to accept differing viewpoints or ideologies. The essay on Dali, 'Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dali', is intriguing. Orwell is torn between the desire to dismiss Dali as a degenerate necrophiliac, while unable to dismiss his artistic merit. However, it is an uneasy acceptance especially when faced with works like 'Mannequin rotting in a taxi-cab'. Orwell also explores the inherent nostalgia in Dali's art which seems to be rooted in the art of the early 1900s. Eventually he concludes that Dali, while brilliant, did produce works, like the one mentioned above, which are 'morally abhorrent'. Dali, himself, may even have found that description satisfying.

Elsewhere Orwell advocates planting trees for the benefit of humanity and as a way of atoning for misdeeds ('A Good Word for the Vicar of Bray') defends the tarnished reputation of old school author PG Wodehouse who was branded a traitor for a series of ill-judged radio broadcasts recorded after having been kept captive by the Germans. The shadow of World War 2 looms ominously over a number of the essays with 'In Defence of English Cooking' looking forward to a time without rationing. And several other pieces draw subtle attention to quislingism and the culture of accusation, while 'Shooting an Elephant'offers a brutal critique of imperialism and its destructive effects on its subjects. The description of the shooting and death of the elephant is one of the most horrifying, gruelling things I have ever read, but perhaps even more horrifying is the petty tyranny of imperialism it represents. That it is still both powerful and frightening more than fifty years later is a testament to Orwell's skill as a writer.

Time and again I found myself wondering what Orwell would make of the world today; big brother is really watching us, and cultural imperialism is still very much alive and well. How would he feel seeing his premonitions come true – resigned? – or would he have a plan, a hope for an alternative and more to say? Writing, the way Orwell uses it, is a tool, it can be entertaining but it is always serving its primary agenda – to inform, to provoke.

There is a diverse range of subjects covered in this skinny volume. The pieces are provocative, readable and very concisely and expressively written. What is also visible is the workings of a sharp and enquiring mind that could confront both its own shortcomings and those of humanity while still maintaining a sense of hope and clarity. These essays are in some ways very distinctly a product of the 1940s, but certain elements remain strikingly pertinent today.

*Tessa Chudy is currently undertaking a PhD in creative writing at Southern Cross University. She is especially interested in the intersection of gothic and noir and the role of the landscape in fiction. Tessa is also a visual artist and lives on the mid north coast of NSW.*

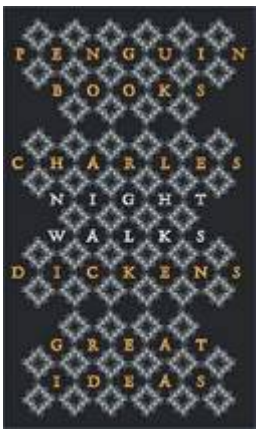
---

**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Nightwalks

## *review by Emily Sutherland*




Charles Dickens
*Night Walks*
Penguin Great Ideas Series, Penguin UK, London
ISBN 9780141047508
Pb 112pp AUD9.95

*Night Walks* is a slim volume, part of the Penguin Great Ideas series, which consists of works that have engendered debate or changed the way we see ourselves. Other writers in this series include Charles Darwin, George Orwell and Sigmund Freud. Charles Dickens is so well known as a novelist that we tend to neglect his journalism. This is a mistake because his journalism was an important part of his writing, and was as influential in bringing to light the 'social ills of the time', as were his novels.

Dickens was the editor of a number of literary magazines in which he published his own articles and serialised fiction, along with the work of others including Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell. As an editor, he sought historical, comic, and scientific articles as well as articles aimed at highlighting the poor social conditions of many working-class Londoners. While Dickens was not advocating revolution and did not follow a defined political creed, he did aim in his writing to challenge and educate his middle-class readership. *Night Walks* could be said to reflect this, he certainly did not hold back with his descriptions of the incredible poverty in London at that time.

The book is a series of literary sketches taken from a larger volume, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, published in1860 [note 1]. In that collection Dickens wrote descriptions and reminiscences as though by a 'Traveller' who journeyed about, observing and reporting on what he saw. The pieces come about, Dickens explained, because of 'a temporary inability to sleep' that found him walking the streets of London at night. Although his avowed object was simply to get through the night, he found 'the pursuit brought [him] into sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night in the year', and this inspired him to write.

Even the 'idlest walk must always have its appointed destination', and Dickens as the Traveller sets himself a specific task before setting out on each walk; he never deviated from this set plan. His night wanderings took him to Covent Garden, where he saw, on market day:

> great wagons of cabbages, with growers' men and boys lying asleep under them, and with sharp dogs from market-garden neighbourhoods looking after the whole, as good as a party. (10)

They took him to the Chatham Dock, where he is instructed by a young boy, whom he names the 'Spirit of the Fort' in the art of identifying vessels on the river and 'precious secrets in reference to beer'. The Traveller undertakes a tour of a workhouse, the worst part being the 'Foul wards':

> a mere series of garrets or lofts, with every inconvenient and objectionable circumstances in their construction, and only accessible by steep and narrow staircases … (47)

He observes women with faces devoid of expression or hope. He visits a hovel, where he sees a

> horrible brown heap on the floor in the corner, which, but for previous experience in this dismal wise, I might not have suspected to be the bed. (61)

On this bed lay a woman, a 'poor creature' suffering from lead poisoning due to working in the lead factory – a common fate for women.

In the 'Star of the East', the Traveller describes a hospital established by a young couple, both medically trained, where children are treated, assisted by 'a common mongrel dog called Poodles', which makes the rounds 'like a house surgeon'. The hospital and its volunteer staff are a source of inspiration among the degradation and neglect.

In 'On an Amateur Beat' the Traveller comes upon a homeless child:

> a wretched little creature, who, clutching at the rags of a pair of trousers with one of its claws, and its ragged hair with the other, pattered with bare feet over the muddy stones. (77)

As he stops to help this child he is assailed by fifty like it 'begging, tumbling, fighting, clamouring yelling, shivering in their nakedness and hunger', and he wonders how the people of London can reconcile the 'public savagery of neglected children' in a city that was 'proud of its power by sea and land and never used its power to seize and save them'.

In *Night Walks* Dickens uses personification and striking analogies that highlight rather than mask the darkness, homelessness, drunkenness and misery. These literary sketches also throw light on his other writings and novels. We can read *Night Walks* on a number of levels. First, each chapter is a vivid description of London in the nineteenth century, at a time when there was great wealth and great poverty. Each chapter shines a light on a specific ill, be it the Betting Shops which induce those who could ill afford it to gamble, and whose proprietors often fleeced their customers or the misery of those working for a pittance in factories and steel works or by

piece-work at home, or the bewilderment of a small boy lost for an entire day in London.

Secondly, we can use this small volume as an introduction to the social journalism which Dickens began publishing in 1850. In 'A Nightly Scene in London' he describes a group of people:

> Crouched against the wall of the Workhouse, in the dark street, on the muddy pavement stones, with the rain raining upon them, were five bundles of rags … five dead bodies would have looked like those five bundles upon which the rain rained down in the public street. (106)

In another piece he gives an account of home for homeless women set up by certain ladies who were 'grieved to think that numbers of their own sex were wandering the streets in degradation, passing through and through the prisons all their lives'. In this report Dickens gives details of specific cases of young women who were saved from such a fate by the ministrations of those who supervised this house, giving shelter and education to the women. We can see his focus is not on entertaining in these longer pieces published as articles but on giving precise information.

Finally, this collection is illuminating because we can see the extent to which both Dickens' personal life and his observations and reflections on the 'social ills' of London influenced his novels. In *Little Dorrit* Old Nandy's fading years are limited and circumscribed by workhouse rules. In *Our Mutual Friend* it is noted that paupers are treated worse than criminals. Dickens' father spent time in the Marshalsea debtor's prison, a place described in *Little Dorrit*. Charles was taken from school and sent to work in a blacking factory for six shillings a week, a sum that was not adequate for his needs. This experience was mirrored in *David Copperfield*. Charles Dickens had an early acquaintance with poverty, an acquaintance that he continued, even when his personal circumstances improved, forcing himself to observe and write. This book serves as an introduction to both his social journalism and his fiction.

**Notes**

1. Phillip, N and Neuburg, V (eds) 1986 *Charles Dickens: A December Vision. His Social Journalism* London: Collins, 1986. return to text

*Emily Sutherland is a Research Scholar at Flinders University. She is a published novelist, poet and playwright. She is the joint editor of* Integrity and Historical Research *which will be published later this year by Routledge Taylor & Francis.*

---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Romance edition

## *review by Tessa Chudy*


David Brooks & Elizabeth McMahon (eds)
*Southerly: The Romance Edition* Vol 70 No 2
Brandl & Schlesinger, Sydney, 2010
ISBN 9781921556142
Pb 224pp AUD$26.95

This is an impressively thick book-like journal that presents itself as a themed edition – romance – no less, and appears complete with a tacky and vaguely disturbing, retro romance cover reproduction. The back cover blurb however emerges as the most satisfying thing about this edition. It raises some provocative questions about the nature, meaning and place of romance in Australian literature. Most of these questions, sadly, remain unanswered.

I am not, I must confess, a romance fan, but a fascination with the workings of genre and, yes, the promises raised by the back cover blurb were quite enough to hook me in. I was soon disappointed, all those promises, but at the end of the journal I was none the wiser.

The essays were easily the most compelling part of the journal. Roslynn Haynes' piece on Marie Bjelke Petersen looks at the way romance conventions were subverted to serve Petersen's personal and religious ideological agendas. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver's piece on Louise Mack is a compelling historical exploration, looking at the literary climate as well as Mack's specific body of work. Using Alfred Buchanan's concept of 'pseudo-literature', Gelder and Weaver ponder the possibilities of an Australian literature while at the same time questioning if such a thing is even possible. Toni Johnson-Woods' deconstruction of 'Adventures of a Squatter', a male colonial romance, is certainly fascinating on a number of levels, and provides an intriguing insight into a literary climate, that was by nature conservative and almost exclusively heterosexual in its focus. Jessica White looks at the bizarre and fascinating relationship between Rosa Praed and her partner, who could inhabit the character of a past life as a roman slave, and how this impacted both on Praed's writing and her perception of herself. Nicolette Stasko in

an intriguing and provocative piece looks at biographical memoir writing and how it can be read as conforming to the conventions of the romance genre.

The Blaiklock lecture about the body spirit continuum in the writing and art of Barbara Hanrahan ties in nicely with the review of Hanrahan's biography in the final section of the journal. It does explore issues of eroticism, sexuality and the representation of the sacred, and is provocative and informative, but does this really fall under the mantle of romance? Anne Marie Priest's essay on the life and loves of Gwen Harwood is certainly filled with innuendo but finally it seems to be more about undercutting the apparent sexless perceptions of the poet and reclaiming her sexuality rather than about the nature of romance in her work.

Whether taken apart or together these essays do not create a coherent or comprehensive overview of the state of romance in Australian literature. Nor does the selection of fiction add to the picture with only the haunting brief piece 'Littoral' by Belinda Campbell really playing with the conventions of romance, with its vivid imagery and sense of impossibility. True 'The Leaving' explores the end of an affair but it doesn't really engage with romance conventions and emerges as a rather cold piece. 'Political Correctness' is a cynical delight, it could possibly be defined as a post romance snapshot of a relationship where the passion has long departed, but that is a bit of a stretch.

There is quite a lot of poetry and it becomes slightly overwhelming at times, some of it does seem to deal with romantic themes, but I would probably have preferred to read a bit more about the concepts or lack of concepts − of Australian romance in whatever form – fiction, poetry, etc. Of the six reviews that sit at the end of the journal only one deals in any sense of the word romance – Sophie Clarke's review of Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver's *Anthology of Colonial Australian Romance*.

On reflection it seems that most of the romance explored here is from the colonial era, the myth of the colonial romance emerges as a fluid thing, undercut by sexuality and individualism but what happened to the genre after the colonial period who, what, where, when? Surely there have been stirrings of some description, mutations, genre crossings, playfulness, confusion?

Okay, okay, I will admit to being picky, even very picky, but I do like my promises fulfilled. Yes there is some interesting work here on Romance in Australian literature, however what is presented is not enough to create a clear picture of just what Australian Romance is or means in a broader literary context. If anything I found myself with an ever-expanding list of questions that for now remain unanswered.

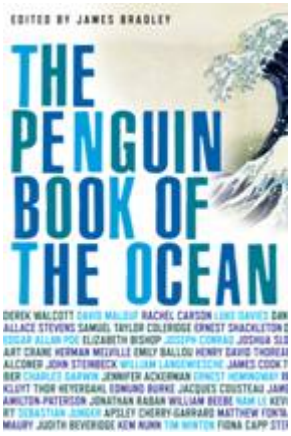
*Tessa Chudy is currently undertaking a PhD in creative writing at Southern Cross University. She is especially interested in the intersection of gothic and noir and the role of the landscape in fiction. Tessa is also a visual artist and lives on the mid north coast of NSW.*

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Penetrating a Mystery

## *review by Alice Robinson*




James Bradley, ed
*The Penguin Book of the Ocean*
Hamish Hamilton Penguin Australia, Camberwell, Vic. 2010
ISBN 9781926428161
Pb 496pp AUD35.00

What we know of the ocean – our cultural repertoire regarding the watery world we inhabit – is most often framed by what is dangerous, bad or threatening: shipwrecks, drownings, sharks. The deep-sea floor of our culture is littered with stories of wrecks, sirens, storms and big hungry fish. Like water on wood, our understandings of the ocean are rubbed smooth by those tales – sea narratives slowly shaping our knowledge of the ocean over centuries; shaping it largely in narratives of human terror, for a majority of our stories centre on a pervasive fear of the enormity and indiscriminate brutality of the ocean.

How inconsequential is the will of one man, we tell each other, against the all-mighty, wild and indifferent sea. The narratives of the 'unsinkable' Titanic and of *Jaws* loom interchangeably large in our collective consciousness, worked and re-worked from the wrath and power of ancient Greek and Roman Gods, to the *Open Water* horror of abandoned pleasure-divers, left nightmarishly drifting, all alone far from shore. That tale is iterated again in *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* through Bradley's 'The Turtle's Graveyard', demonstrating just how much currency these narratives carry, retold across genres, forms and time.

Importantly, *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* invites a more penetrating examination of the sea than the old dichotomy of fear and thrill. It shows the majesty and might of the oceans, their quiet, grand beauty; and to some extent, their elusiveness. Perhaps they are unknowable to the human race in and of themselves, but what forms them for us is our own analysis of them, the way we turn to them again and again in text – as *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* demonstrates – searching for some kind of self-generated wisdom regarding the deep and complex worlds beyond our coastline.

Editor James Bradley's selections (e.g. Edgar Allan Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', Sebastian Junger's 'The Perfect Storm', even Nam Le's 'The Boat') show us that human relationships to the sea are perhaps so complex, enduring and fraught because, in all dealings with the ocean, we are not at all in charge. Instead, that watery 'wild, rank place' (140), as Thoreau terms it, is shown to be its own master, indifferent to the pitiful taming, traversing efforts of citizens, and seamen.

Those excerpts that explicitly detail our feeble efforts to know the ocean through science and exploration, even cultural critique (e.g. William Falconer's 'Lemma', James Cook's 'Journal of the Second Voyage (1772-1775)', Fiona Capp's 'That Oceanic Feeling', Matthew Fontaine Maury's 'The Physical Geography of the Sea and its Meteorology') reveal more the depth of human fascination with the subject matter, our desire to immerse ourselves in all things oceanic – to calculate, tame and understand – than they do of the ocean itself. Instead, across the anthology, the ocean remains more an object to be addressed and measured – reflected on – than it appears as a real entity in itself.

In searching for answers, these textual deep-sea dives serve only to reinforce their supposition that the ocean is enigmatic, remote and unknowable, and at the same time, irresistible to human kind. In that way, the book might better have been titled, *The Penguin Book of Humans*. This is not a criticism suggesting a failure of the collection, but merely an indication of the inexorable searching, questioning and positioning of the ocean by human kind that the chosen pieces so overtly convey. And even though Wayne Levin's photographic essay 'Resident Spirits' appears at the centre of the book, allowing the ocean to speak for itself to some extent (the haunting images of graceful whales and schools of fish adding a valuable dimension to the literary investigations) these images are, we must remember, also human interpretation of the mysterious, illusive place; just another subjective gaze submerged.

Opening with Rachel Carson's lyrical creation story and Derek Walcott's poetic account which uses the development of civilization as metaphor for the evolution of the sea while simultaneously evoking the evolution of the sea in order to illuminate the past, Bradley begins his exploration of the ocean, reasonably, at the 'beginning'. This is beginning in a geologic or evolutionary sense, rather than in a chronological sense according to author biography or bibliography. An editor faced with the task of assembling such a compilation makes many choices regarding selection of authors, works and excerpts, order and arrangement, and those choices shape the meaning and form of the narrative whole. *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* is thus a collage, the sum of its parts. What Bradley's choices reveal about their editor is his awe of – and sensitivity to – the breadth of the ocean as a literal and literary place. Bradley has clearly tried to be inclusive of a wide range of voices, forms, genres, periods, experiences and imaginings in creating this literary expedition. From its beginnings, the book ranges widely across time and place; each piece one unique wave, in the overall sea of the collection entire.

As I was reading – and largely enjoying – the various pieces, I puzzled over the question of what motivates the commissioning and creation of such a book, if not to provide the reader with some knowledge of literature generally, and the ocean more specifically; and of course how the one interacts with the other. I am not certain that *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* illuminates either ocean or literature in or of itself: mostly the ocean is revealed by these literary investigations as being *un*knowable.

However, what the collection does provide is a littoral zone *between* literature and the ocean: a place where the two wash up together, and meet.

Certainly, by selecting, extracting and assembling out-of-context disparate pieces on a particular theme, a new narrative is formed, one that tells a broader cultural story than the original works did when standing alone. This is interesting, of course, and valuable. However, I wonder about the need for prior knowledge of the provenance for these selections and excerpts. A sensitive reader can glean a measure of meaning from the collection, but there is a literacy required here that goes beyond the mere ability to read text, one that presumes a certain knowledge-base; one that, more often than not, rides on the cultural capital of education, privilege and class. What I mean to say is that rather than educating by collection, the collection to some extent excludes. Bradley takes pains to point out, in his articulate, rather beautifully-written introduction, just what he hopes the pieces en mass convey:

> [The book] is not, nor does it pretend to be a comprehensive survey; rather it is a personal selection of writing I believe has something to tell us about the ways we think about the ocean and, more particularly, the ways in which the ocean has shaped our imaginations, and by extension our selves. (2)

However, if the reader has not encountered e.g. Melville's *Moby Dick* or Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* in full form before, can they adequately access all that this book has to offer? This sense of being an iceberg tip, this lack of literary context, is why the book fails to really illuminate, particularly considering that the overwhelming majority of pieces collected are excerpts.

I think the book might have been improved – or at least the reader's comprehension broadened regarding the cultural significance of each work, its place in time and history, its contribution – had the context been made clearer, perhaps through the inclusion of a short introductory passage preceding each excerpt. While authors' biographical details are provided in an index at the back, it is really the piece of writing that I longed to place.

Having said that, and it might seem a contradiction, the fact that these pieces are forced together without the explicit provision of their contexts is also why the book is so compelling. The inherent strength of *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* is that we come to the mystery of that place – the ocean – through a collection of works that are allowed space to exist together and create something new. Each reader will decide whether they find Bradley's approach wholly satisfying, or whether greater depths of understanding might have been plumbed with the provision of some explanatory detail for each work.

In all, *The Penguin Book of the Ocean* delivers a fine and intriguing wash of writing. Like those early mariners who crossed the oceans of the world with only the stars to guide them, largely ignorant of what lay beneath; like modern submarines that sink to depths man can only dream of to photograph the dark recesses of the ocean's secret places; and like every explorer in between, including that lone figure on the shore, gazing at a distant horizon, the book allows its readers a kind of access to the sea; a literary snorkel, boat and gills. It strikes me that Joshua Slocum's observation from 'Sailing Alone Around the World' might more than

adequately apply also to the task of diving deep into the textual seas represented in *The Penguin Book of the Ocean*:

> The acute pain of solitude experienced at first never returned. I had penetrated a mystery … I had sailed through a fog. I had met Neptune in his wrath, but he found that I had not treated him with contempt, and so he suffered me to go on and explore. (115)

*Alice Robinson is completing a PhD at Victoria University. She works as a freelance writer, professional book and writing group facilitator, and lectures in creative writing at NMIT. Her fiction, reviews and essays have been published in print and online. She blogs on books and reading at www.critrature.blogspot.com*

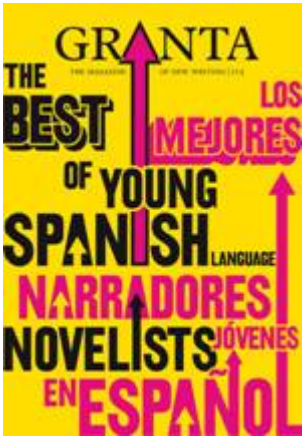
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# The Best of Young Spanish Language Novelists

## *review by Luke McKechnie*




John Freeman, ed.
*Granta 113 The Best of Young Spanish Language Novelists*
(*Los Mejores Narradores Jóvenes en Español*)
The Magazine of New Writing - Winter 2010
ISBN 9781905881239
Pb 256pp AUD27.99
http://www.granta.com/Online-Only/GRANTA-113-Best-of-Young-Spanish-Language-Novelists

Should you be unacquainted with *Granta*, then it is my pleasure to introduce you. *Granta*, *The Magazine of New Writing*, is a themed quarterly anthology that comes out of the UK. Each edition includes a collection of published works, chosen with acuity; excerpts from works-in-progress, commissioned pieces and generally a photo-essay. The production values and quality of the writing selections are defining features.

Access to *Granta*, is akin to having an excellent reading-buddy, someone who will draw your attention to fascinating or challenging texts that you might otherwise miss. The editors have a brilliant track-record of choosing winners; take a look at the list of contributors to *Granta 43: Best of Young British Novelists* published in 1993 [note 1] – to see a constellation of relative no-names that transformed into literary stars.

*Granta* over the years has been a key to the secret garden – or perhaps more accurately, nursery – of the literary world. It has introduced me to writers that have become favourites (Gellhorn, Mars-Jones, Barnes, Ishiguro, Hollinghurst, etc, etc) and to some real treasures of literature, for example *The Anatomy of Desire* by John L'Heureux.

While the magazine has no stated political or literary manifesto, each edition is themed; the central thread of *Granta 113* is young Spanish-language writers. 1975 marked the end of the Franco dictatorship in Spain; however, repressive regimes persisted across South America for at least another decade. Gradually the locus of exiled South American writers

migrated from Paris to post-Franco Spain. Each of the twenty-two writers included in this collection was born in 1975 or thereafter and writes in Spanish. Each has published at least one novel or short-story collection; few have previously been published in English.

There are twenty translators for these twenty-two texts. To my reading, the translations were mostly fluid, other than some small misfires; 'aliquot', 'insufflate' and 'disquisition' can be found in English dictionaries, but before this, I was innocent to them. I was amused rather than confused by a '...bordeaux coloured carpet...', but my reading was disrupted by extensive untranslated text (perhaps some things are untranslatable): 'Ele pinta, expôs em Amsterdã três vezes, trabalha como curador'.

There are some cross-cultural issues, but that goes with the territory. In regards to attitudes to equality, both racial and sexual, on the basis of this anthology, the reader could be forgiven for forming a view that much of the Spanish-speaking world is as yet unreconstructed. The terms 'black', 'white' and 'mulatto' are used unapologetically in what presents as near-contemporary fiction.

Unsurprisingly, sex is referred to a number of times in these texts but seems functional rather than passionate, almost unilateral. There is an adolescent desire to shock; this is particularly true in the opening piece, Puenzo's 'Cohiba', but is evident elsewhere. In 'Cohiba', a young woman attending a film festival is fascinated by a man in the seat beside her who masturbates and ejaculates onto the back of the seat in front of him: 'I can't tear my eyes from his work of art, the most ephemeral expression of modern art'.

Relationships are presented as loose connections. In Roncagliolo's 'Stars and Stripes', the main protagonist describes his relationship trajectory as: 'In time I married, divorced, married again and divorced again.' Hasbún is more lyrical in 'The Place of Losses' when describing separation, 'I missed her already, although she was only a half metre away' – the significance is that what is lost, or sensed as loss is not the person, or the relationship, but the imagining of it. Navarro in 'Gerado's Letters' is perhaps most brutal, when she describes the arc of a relationship in terms of: 'We've spent nine years losing respect for each other'.

Much of the writing is solipsistic, some reads as blogging, an undifferentiated stream of consciousness, which may be contemporary, but also self-referential. Schweblin's 'Olingiris' is introspective, without being revelatory. Pron's 'A Few Words on the Lifecycle of Frogs' is a provincial South American writer writing about ... a provincial South American writer. Yushimito's 'Seltz' seems one-dimensional, and includes text that reads like a wikipedia entry on wolverine dominance. Labbé's 'The Girls Resembled Each Other in the Unfathomable' reads like a voice-over back-story for a CSI TV show.

Some of the texts are disjointed and episodic – with descriptions reading like screen directions. In 'Cohiba' there is also a membrane between the reader and the writer, possibly a lens or a viewfinder. It seems to me that 'Cohiba' is intensely sensory; visual, noisy, smelly – and that it might more successfully be rendered on film rather than as text. The same could be said of Néspoli's 'The Bonfire and the Chessboard', a fascinating portrayal of a chess-game as duel. Néspoli builds tension well using internal dialogue and regular references to the expiring game-clock – again perhaps more amenable to film. There is beauty too; Néspoli weaves

poetry into his text, he describes a bonfire of papers as: ‘Flocks of ash rose through the smoke like black butterflies’.

Earlier Spanish-language writers such as Cortázar, Dorfman and Allende railed against the political and social inequities in South America. Born after 1975, these writers have little memory of the social and moral circumstances that challenged earlier generations. I was hoping for commentary on the lives of their parents’ generation cast in the cool, distant and judgemental eye of children coming of moral age. History as retold by the next generation, in the way that Berhnard Schlink tried to make sense of the Third Reich in *The Reader*. I did not find this.

The editors characterise these stories as ‘quotidian’; I think banal is more accurate. This is not to say that there are not interesting and well-constructed narratives in this collection that include flashes of real literary skill. I enjoyed Montes’ ‘The Hotel Life’; I was stimulated by Hernández’s ‘The Survivor’ and charmed by Falco’s ‘In Utah There Are Mountains Too’. ‘Cohiba’ is continuing to creep up on me as a slow burn. Generally, I found I liked fragments, or parts of the texts, which are themselves mostly excerpts of larger works. I had a feeling that these texts, this anthology is like the product of a writer’s workshop – much of the writing is good, crafted and workmanlike – but none of it is extraordinary. For the most part I could not engage with the characters or the settings, it mostly seemed too much like small-town, middle-America. Perhaps the South Americans are overawed by their northern cousins – they would not be alone in this. Ultimately I ended up feeling “Whatever” – perhaps these twenty-two have captured the zeitgeist?

The editors have set themselves a challenge, how many of these writers will endure a decade? I hope some do, but I suspect that not many of the ones that do will make proud reference to these early pieces. I do commend *Granta* to you, but suggest that while a regular subscriber may overlook this edition as a bump in the road, for a new reader, I want to point out that it is unrepresentative and I would encourage you to look at the back catalogue (all of which are still in print) for alternate examples.

## Notes

1. Contributors to *Granta 43: Best of Young British Novelists*:

Iain Banks: 'Under Ice'
Louis de Bernières: 'The Brass Bar'
Anne Billson: 'Born Again'
Tibor Fischer: 'Listed for Trial'
Esther Freud: 'Lessons in Inhaling'
Alan Hollinghurst: 'Sharps and Flats'
Kazuo Ishiguro: 'The Gourmet'
AL Kennedy: 'Failing to Fall'
Philip Kerr: 'Reference Points'
Hanif Kureishi: 'Eight Arms to Hold You'
Adam Lively: 'Letters from Wellfleet'
Adam Mars-Jones: 'Neighbours'
Candia McWilliam: 'The Many Colours of Blood'
Lawrence Norfolk: 'A Bosnian Alphabet'
Ben Okri: 'A Bizarre Courtship'
Caryl Phillips: 'West'
Will Self: 'Scale'
Nicholas Shakespeare: 'Wavery's Last Post'
Helen Simpson: 'Heavy Weather'
Jeanette Winterson: 'The Poetics of Sex' return to text

*Luke McKechnie is a freelance writer and reviewer.*

---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Waiting for flight

## *review by Emily Bitto*


Susan Hampton
*News of the Insect World*
Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2010
ISBN 9780734041050
Pb 91pp AUD21.95

Have you ever wondered what a dragonfly and a poet have in common? Full of such wondering, and of wonder, Susan Hampton's latest collection of poems – *News of the Insect World* – will take your hand and lead you in search of answers.

A number of interlinked metaphors structure *News of the Insect World*. As the title suggests, the common vehicle is the lives of insects: their fragility; their fleetingness; and their potential for seemingly miraculous transformations. Yet the concerns and questions here are very much human ones: how best to live one's life; how to come to terms with transience and mortality; whether transcendence is possible – in the form of leaps of faith and creativity that take the individual from a nascent state to a wholly "other" plane; how best to wait in patience and preparation for those leaps, which may never come; how to cope with doubt. These are weighty topics. However, they are dealt with gently, at times with humour, through the overarching insect metaphor.

The collection's opening poem – 'Infinity' (13) – introduces the subjects of mortality and the fleeting nature of life. It hints that it may be possible to cheat death, to live on, in a sense, through the notice and care of others. The poem, narrated by a dead dragonfly, begins with a simple but detailed description:

> Three of my legs are intact.
> My back left leg is gone
> at the knee. My right
> front arm, gone. The left
> forearm covers my eyes, as if

I could not face my death.
Yet it's happened already.

Though death has already established its inevitable preeminence, the poem ends with tentative hope:

It is to be considered
that I have not been run over,
but tenderly collected
brought home and admired –
all my detail, down to
the tortoise-shell-coloured
figure-8 mark on the
upper shell of my stomach. (13)

Implicitly, this poem brings itself within its own purview. It is a poem about the significance of poetry as a way of staving off extinction. The dragonfly has not only been collected and admired, it has also been immortalised in the lines we are reading. Careful observation and recording of the details of everyday life is established here as a vital task, almost an ethics. Through this 'tender'approach to the world – even its smallest parts – significance and meaning are conferred not only on what is observed but on the mindful observer too.

*News of the Insect World* is divided into four sections. The organising principle behind these divisions, is not immediately evident. While the collection as a whole has a natural sense of narrative arc, the poems within each section can seem at times inconsistent in subject matter and voice. The first section, for example, which begins with the contemplative tone of 'Infinity,' ends with a surreal five-page hallucinatory narrative poem titled 'Club Voodoo' (21-25), which appears incongruous, even inaccessible, in the context of the preceding poems. 'Club Voodoo' is one of a small number of poems which seem perhaps too idiosyncratic in content, almost as though they are included for a specific, informed readership; these poems do not easily translate beyond the personal to speak to a broader audience.

After the fever-dream of 'Club Voodoo', the second section returns to the insect theme in a more focused manner. Two poems in this section – 'Dragonfly and Nymph' (30-32) and 'The Dung Beetle' (33-36) – offer nuanced, extended reflections on the central concerns of the collection as a whole. In 'Dragonfly and Nymph' we are told:

the life of a nymph
can last three years –
strange then the adult
is gone in a day. (32)

This poem considers the fact that the majority of life may be spent in a process of formation or slow reaching towards one's potential, and that the eventual realisation of this potential may be fleeting. Whether this makes the brief moment more or less significant is a question the poem does not try to resolve. We are simply told that we all begin our lives 'like Mayfly / nymphs' (32). Although the speaker in these poems is yearning towards transcendence (the title poem concludes: 'I've been a caterpillar / so long now'), there is also a sense that there is an equal dignity in the long 'nymph' years that precede the single day of flight. 'Dragonfly and Nymph' concludes with a couplet: 'There is more to the life / of the mind

than we first admit,' perhaps referring to the inscrutable gestation of ideas or poems, which, like butterflies, seem to be the product of a kind of miracle birth, but which are in fact formed slowly and sometimes laboriously.

In the third and fourth sections of the collection, the poems become more overtly focused on a search for meaning. They detail an earnestly ethical, spiritual, and even explicitly religious quest for grace. These are mostly long poems, and they develop a sustained rhythm, almost like prayer, for example in 'The Fourth Sister' (67-73):

> The role of the intercessor
> may not be well understood,
> the diplomat,
> the one-who-goes-before,
> the sacrifice,
> the here-in-the-flesh healer,
> the laying on of hands,
> the human element
> of an abstract idea,
> the stories. (71)

The speaker in a later poem, 'The Gulf of Martaban' (74-78), hints towards a religious conversion that re-echoes the theme of transformation woven throughout the book:

> Retracted as an insect
> I stop reading the newspapers
> think of my friend
> at the airport:
> my secular life fell apart
> when she offered
> to take me to mass (77).

Yet, despite this gesturing towards a possible epiphany or revelation, the poems remain full of uncertainty and searching. In the final poem, 'In Further News' (88-91), the speaker once again compares herself to a larva awaiting transformation:

> Is [a grub] not the sign of something new –
> in fact, like the phoenix,
> a symbol of renewal
> transubstantiation, even –
> In Wagga once, full of doubt
> I remember thinking,
> I've done all this before,
> going over the same ground
> /. . ./
> The migratory path
> isn't one I understand:
> how can I transform?
> I'm glad to see the caterpillars
> of bogong moths are stoutly built. (88-91)

It is with this tentative, ambivalent, but hopeful conclusion that *News of the Insect World* leaves us.

If I were to offer a criticism of this collection it would be that its eye is not always as finely attuned to the small details as it implicitly tells its reader

to try to be. In an early poem we are told simply that '*[a]n insect* comes and tilts its wings to the sun' (17 my emphasis), rather than being given the name of the specific insect in question. This is disappointing in a collection that attempts to develop an ethics around 'the nobility of the miniature' (38). Yet these lapses in attention and the occasionally too-prosaic language somehow fit with the unassuming stance of the collection, which at every turn admits its doubts and failures to achieve transcendence. These are humble, earth-dwelling poems. The voice, the syntax, embodies its groundedness in the everyday. It is a poetry seeking flight, but aware that such transubstantiation comes only after long years of struggle, and that even then it may only last a day.

*Emily Bitto is a Melbourne-based writer. Her poetry has featured in a number of Australian publications, including the* Australian Literary Review*, the* Sydney Morning Herald*, and* HEAT. *She is currently undertaking a PhD and teaching creative writing at the University of Melbourne.*

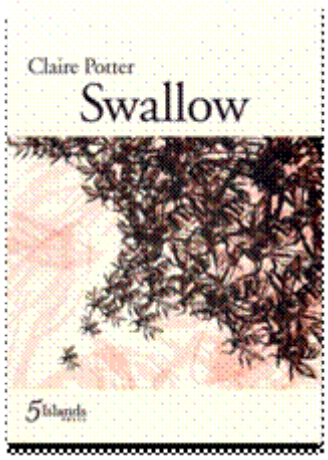
---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Swallow

## *review by Sandra Burr*




Claire Potter
*Swallow*
Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2010
ISBN 9780734041593
Pb 81pp AUD21.95

Is there such a thing as 'extreme poetry'? Poetry where poets write to the edge of their craft, take risks, mix it up, talk to strangers? If there is, then Claire Potter is one such poet. In *Swallow* she writes with extreme elegance, incredible style and with such rich complexity that you have to come up for air every so often for fear of drowning in the irresistible beauty of her words.

Potter is West Australian born, Sydney educated and sometimes European located - both physically and through kinship. She straddles all these places with ease, her poems slipping between Australia and Europe, the differences noted but barely noticed because what matters is nature; animals, landscapes, atmospheric moments of light and shadow, keenly observed and full of gorgeous imagery. Here is just one example from the third verse of her opening poem:

> 5th February  so little b*onheur*
> in the half-present moment
> instead brouhaha
> velcro stars  verse cracking winter
> full of tinsel bees  flames smudging wax
> across
> a gunpowder sky
> (from 'La Haine des Fleurs')

Another very noticeable thing about this poet is her stylistic choices. The poems are full of gaps and spaces, irregular indentations, ampersands and unclosed brackets all of which force the reader to really engage with the sound and probe the many possible meanings of her individual words. In

contrast to such intricately crafted poems are others, like ‘Minnie and Tom’and ‘Eventide’ and the almost prose-like treatment of ‘A Durable Grandmother’, whose arrangements reflect the straightforward simplicity of the narrative. Potter is a poet who is not afraid to experiment with line and meter carefully tailoring structure and style to content.

She is also the mistress of wordplay. Strings of words gather speed before being deftly reined in, sounds chime and echo in unexpected places, words are repeated to emphasise a question, a puzzle, a moment, and odd images capture and delight. Potter uses all of these signature devices in the beautifully crafted ‘Sewing an Onion’ in which ‘tucking’, ‘untucked’, ‘clucked’, ‘buck like tiny bulls’, and ‘stuck’, all make an appearance, as do the playful lines:

> Art is tar, a rat stuck in tar
> I don’t use art - we go arm-in-arm
> (from ‘Sewing an Onion”)

Potter’s writing is controlled and polished but she also displays a fine sense of humour often expressed by the juxtaposition of the scholarly or lyrical with the everyday. The ‘rusty entrails of a stormwater drain’ appear in ‘An Astra Bird’, there is ‘the campfire and a solitary chop’ in ‘Glass Bead Meadow’ and references to washing, dishes and bins in ‘Wishbone for Rufus’. The inclusion of instructions for making bee puppets in the otherwise lyrical ‘Bee Puppets’ is another example and one that emphasises the poet’s ability to draw us in to the narrative. Sometimes her use of unfamiliar words causes us to stop and puzzle– what is a furcula? – but never long enough to break the spell and then she enchants by taking us back into familiar territory with, for instance, a scientific description of a Welcome Swallow in ‘Not in the Sequence of a Metronome’. While Potter appears to write for an audience familiar with the things she refers to in her poems (and some, like the Joni Mitchell album for example, may not be well known) she is considerate enough to include a section of Notes at the back of the book explaining the more obscure references.

We can read Potter on any number of levels – for the tenderness with which she regards her subjects; for the sense she evokes in us of being both inside and outside the poem; for the enigmatic quality and beauty of her imagery; for those moments of recognition and alienation, the obvious and the unknown or the sheer pleasure of her words. Perhaps the best thing about these poems is the sense of sharing that Potter evokes, a certain generosity of spirit that invites the reader to not only engage in a conversation with the poet, but to keep coming back. Even if you do have to come up for air, you will want to dive straight back in to this rich collection of poems - over and over again.

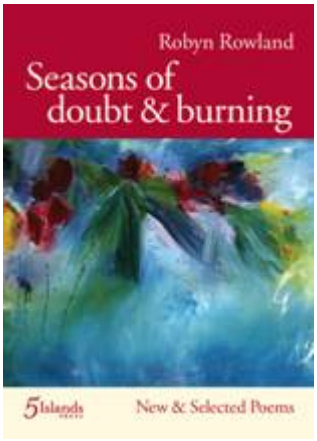
*Sandra Burr has a PhD in creative writing. She is an adjunct professional associate at the University of Canberra where she teaches creative writing and creative research.*

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**

**TEXT review**

# Seasons of Doubt and Burning

## *review by Jay Daniel Thompson*




Robyn Rowland
*Seasons of Doubt and Burning: New and Selected Poems*
Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2010
ISBN 9780734041609
Pb 226 pp AUD29.95

Robyn Rowland rose to prominence as a Women's Studies academic before reinventing herself as a poet. *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* is a collection of Rowland's verse from across three decades. The collection makes for a lyrical and moving read.

The key motif of this collection is nature. Rowland takes her reader through bushfires, across windswept beaches and around the Great Ocean Road. The poems unfold in Australia, Ireland, East Timor. Throughout the collection, Rowland draws connections between the natural world and such diverse issues as childbirth, death, war, cancer, old age, domestic violence, and adolescent sexuality.

The most impressive aspect of *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* is Rowland's careful and imaginative eye for detail. Witness the following description of the wildlife that was ravaged during the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983:

> Trees bent hurrying form the blast
> are kiln-baked stiff against the slopes,
> or near Anglesea, their heads glossy,
> still hold the garish colour of flame.
> Hills have a two-day stubble
> their grubby nudity embarrassing and haunting
> (138)

These passages are almost cinematic in their vividness. Many readers would not have witnessed the natural disaster mentioned above, or be familiar with the locations that Rowland cites, but she gives us a strong mental image of what she has (presumably) observed.

As might be evident, the book explores the myriad ways in which the natural world shapes our experience of our bodies and emotions, as well as our perception of the obstacles we encounter in our daily lives. In the above passage, fire-damaged hills are transformed into naked, injured humans. Elsewhere, Rowland writes of her battle with breast cancer:

> The tick of time
> might camouflage a rush of fuse;
> that creak of bone, sharp ache in the hip
> could be shrapnel from the first blast;
> the small dent or is it a subtle knob of flesh,
> could be the landmine that escaped detection –
> another breast gone. (152)

In this piece, cancers become 'landmines', as well as the 'terrorists' who have planted these landmines (152). The cancerous 'terrorists' hide within deceptively idyllic 'green fields', and have 'laid waste' to any certainty about a happy and healthy future (152-3). The poem ends with Rowland reflecting wistfully on 'another country' where 'the surprise of death / arising early / never clouds the blue sky' (153).

The political awareness that runs through *Seasons of Doubt and Burnin*g is unsurprising given Rowland's professional background. In her poem 'Ink, paper, voice', Rowland suggests why poetry is a useful medium for writers to convey their views (ideological and otherwise):

> Poetry and music carry us through the little
> deaths, and the great;
> float us along a current we still imagine is
> endless,
> though we know better. (35)

This passage follows the spirit of Audre Lorde's essay 'Poetry is not a Luxury' (1977). For both Lorde and Rowland, poetry-writing is not a frivolous or abstract endeavour. In true feminist style, poetry helps transform the personal into the political. Poets can use a variety of literary techniques (including metaphor) to provide new and unique perspectives on different aspects of society.

Yet while this collection is politically-aware, Rowland avoids disguising ideology as verse. She does not encourage her readers to 'take sides' on any issue. Consider, for example, the poem entitled 'Snap frozen'. In this piece, Rowland remembers when (as a child) she witnessed her sister being photographed by a male stranger on a beach. This stranger asked her sister to 'slip her swimsuit strap / off her shoulder' (20). Rowland connects this memory with the 2008 controversy surrounding Bill Henson's photographs of semi-naked adolescent girls. As she puts it, the long-ago photograph of her sibling has returned 'in another thirteen year old girl, /so lovely the photo, so uncertain the child' (21):

> You want to know by whose hand
> she became naked, like that. Who
> procured the normalising of the voyeur;
> made the choice of camera and the word 'art'
> an acceptable dividing line
> between beach and studio;
> while nausea rises again in the

watcher on the beach
and in the watched? (21)

Rowland signals that she will not frame the Henson case as yet another 'art/pornography' debate. The very term 'art' is rendered problematic: why do we use this term to describe a photo of a young girl that has been taken in a studio by a stranger, but not a similar photo that has been snapped by a stranger 'on the beach'? Both Rowland and the reader are placed in the position of 'the watcher': Rowland watches her sister pose for the man, while the reader 'watches' the sister, the teenage Rowland and also Henson's teenage model. The viewer is left to speculate on how 'the watched' girls of this poem feel about being the object of a stranger's desiring gaze.

The only weak spot in this collection is the poem entitled 'The Fallen'. This piece pays homage to Susan Hawthorne's novel *The Falling Woman* (1992). Rowland's intertextual source is appropriate: Hawthorne is herself a well-known Australian feminist poet who has written extensively on corporeality and nature. Yet 'The Fallen' seems to be merely an excuse to rework the key motif in Hawthorne's text (a body that falls – metaphorically and sometimes literally – through time and space). The homage aspect of this poem could have been more effective had the piece been developed more fully (it runs for a little under two pages).

*Seasons of Doubt and Burning* covers some bleak territory, but it is never depressing. Rowland's use of poetry to explore confronting and difficult issues is commendable. Her elegant, evocative verse will hopefully endear this collection to a broad readership.

*Dr Jay Daniel Thompson completed a PhD in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne in 2009. He is currently a freelance writer, researcher and reviewer. Jay lives in Melbourne's northern suburbs.*

---

**TEXT**
**Vol 15 No 1 April 2011**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy**
**Text@griffith.edu.au**