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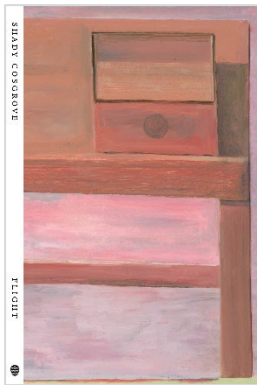
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TEXT review

Holding life still

review by Jodi Vial



Shady Cosgrove

Flight

Life Before Man/Gazebo Books, Summer Hill NSW 2024

ISBN 9780645920963

Pb 142pp AUD23.08

We are situated by the first line of the opening poem in Shady Cosgrove's prose-poetry collection, *Flight*: "Covid came on me, an infection of spirit".

What follows is an experience that simultaneously embraces black humour, dystopian streetscapes, abandoned whitegoods, oceans, forests, motherhood and many human experiences in between. Essentially, *Flight* is a log book of the pandemic in which there are many destinations for the reader to recognise.

The book has been mindfully designed, with no page numbers and no text appearing on the cover, other than the title and author name along the spine. The cover image is an abstract

painting in muted colours by Phil Day, entitled *Her No. 1*. All eyes are on the text inside, and the movement of the words.

I first read Cosgrove's book in an air-conditioned room, sequestered from December's dire humidity. I read it from cover to cover – which it seems designed for – like an aeroplane passenger with seatbelt fitted and fastened. The momentum of the words sometimes forced me back in my seat, yet at other times I felt the strange weightlessness of air travel, and the ability to move freely around the cabin even as I remained fixated on my final destination.

These are sensations heightened by Cosgrove's own experiences, and her documenting of them. In one poem, as she disembarks from her first flight in two years into a dystopian LAX, there is no mistaking the difference between then and now: "Night infects the accordion tunnel, and my shadow lacks proportion – but of course I'm wearing two masks, glasses, a face shield: we've all forgotten how to interpret the world."

As an immigrant from America to Australia some decades ago, Cosgrove's poetry inhabits and interprets the liminal space between arrival and departure. A recurring narrative in the book's four-part LAX series is a pre-arranged meeting between the poet and her childhood friend, which takes place in the friend's car in an airport parking lot during a brief stopover: "She presses my arm. We don't have long, she says." The pandemic is everywhere, though never mentioned by name: "I want to hold her hand but need to sanitise." Yet even in these brief lines, Cosgrove conjures the image of two friends and the weight of time passing:

Decades ago, during summers in college, we worked in a bakery with sagging floorboards and wisteria hanging over windows. We'd sneak out through beaded curtains and scoop handfuls of cookie dough from the walk-in fridge. We drank so much coffee we were the most awake we'd ever be in our lives.

Throughout the collection, there is a dark humour in the recounting of events we probably all recognise from the Covid lockdown experience – online yoga, online therapy sessions, even online dating/birdwatching. There is an added poignancy in Cosgrove's writing, which weaves these novel experiences within a landscape of bleak mundanities otherwise known as life, which we now know we cannot avoid even in the middle of a pandemic.

There is a beautiful but heartbreaking collision of the novel and the mundane in "Last Day of Term", the recollection of a school Book Week parade attended by students in their parents' cars, while costume-wearing teachers line the footpath "standing three metres apart". The movement, and containment, within the poem is a breathtaking distillation of the themes at the heart of *Flight*:

They're all waving while cars honk and children lean out of windows. My son begs me to stop crying but my head is dizzy and the seat belt has locked me in. We pause at the crosswalk on this suburban street, windscreen glittered with dust and sunlight, so faraway-close to normal it makes my chest hurt.

The textual structure of the collection, with its wide open spaces alternating between blocks of free-flowing, enjambment-free poetry, adds another dimension that retrospectively recreates the experience of pandemic lockdowns. One moment we are seemingly trapped in a house with anthropomorphised household appliances, the next hanging upside down in a tree with fruit bats. The impact of the poems is interspersed with air bubbles of white space, arriving with impeccable timing just as the walls are about to close in.

Those walls appear as literal boundaries – within the body, the bedroom, the suburban house or the streets beyond it – but also as metaphorical constraints in the form of human relationships with lovers, with mothers and with children. Those relational landscapes broaden out into encounters with the natural world, in the small herd of zebras that takes up residence in the living room, in the haunting presence of backyard bats, and in poignant online exchanges over the strange beauty of live-streamed baby birds, their birth and fledging. A delicately balanced dialogue between containment and flight takes place throughout.

Reading *Flight* took me back into an isolating, terrifying space – the domestic space, the space of motherhood magnified, the feeling of life being on hold but also hurtling into oblivion with no way to know when or where it will stop – but in the most beautiful way, Cosgrove’s writing also freed me from that space. I did not know I had still been carrying so much of it with me.

This sense of expansion is voiced in the final poem of the collection, a five-line summoning of the natural world that draws from Cosgrove’s experience as an American expat, between two worlds, and subverts Robert Frost’s immortal quandary:

Maybe it’s core to the immigrant, restlessness and imagining. But this desire is bigger than ‘path’ and ‘not-taken’. I want both and I want to be the whole woods, too – every fern, tree and canopy, the ground underfoot, the smell of composting leaves and arriving rain.

In those lines, both book and reader are expanded out into the living realms that were in many ways closed to us during the pandemic. Cosgrove again expertly and poetically distils the human experience, this time post-lockdowns, when the world seemed somehow exponentially bigger, and beckoning more loudly, than it had before.

Jodi Vial writes across the forms of poetry, short fiction and creative non-fiction, with a focus on the intersection of literature, landscape and history. She is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, working on a hybrid memoir that centres women’s archival voices. Her microfiction has been shortlisted and longlisted in the Joanne Burns Microfiction Prize, and she has been published by Spineless Wonders, Recent Work Press and Papatuanuku Press. Jodi lives and writes on the unceded lands of the Awabakal and Worimi people.



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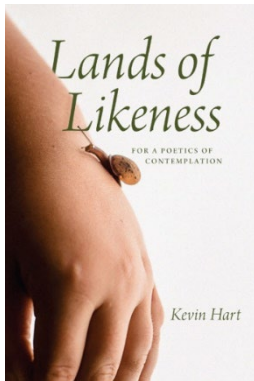
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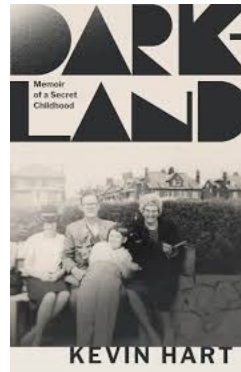
TEXT review

Learning to read the *Templum*

review by Philip Harvey



Kevin Hart
*Lands of likeness: for a poetics of
contemplation*
University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2023
ISBN 9780226827582
Pb 432pp AUD69.88



Kevin Hart
Dark-Land: memoir of a secret childhood
Paul Dry Books, Philadelphia 2024
ISBN 9781589881891
Pb 241pp AUD44.08

The copious, sprawling, adventurous Gifford lectures found in Kevin Hart's *Lands of Likeness* are claimed to be focused in the first instance on contemplation, and then on contemplation and modern poetry. In other words, two of the abiding preoccupations of this author: (1) the primarily religious question of prayer, how we as humans relate to God and the world; and (2) why we turn our language into poetic forms, and why we do that in the context of a world recovering from modernity.

However, the lectures chart the altering understanding of the term "contemplation" itself, with strong accent on cultural definitions through time, which means that a reader hoping to find here a manual on how to practise contemplation in their own space and time may be

disappointed. Such a reader must pick through considerable background and digressions to find the valuable sentences to aid them in their progress. No, the lectures are a matrix of appreciations and understandings of changing variations of contemplation, overlain on examples ancient and modern that Hart considers exemplify those variations. It is a conversation between theology, philosophy, and literature. The results are a kind of anthology of possibilities about how contemplation works, complicated in creative ways by the encounter with the poetic act: attention is ultimately upon the poem itself as an object of contemplation.

A hermeneutic of contemplation is based on an essence that “can be beheld in an act of understanding that might or might not be infinite” (p. 87). By looking at this essence we may “lose ourselves”, in Schopenhauer’s formulation, or become “conscious of our intentional acts,” in Husserl’s. Coleridge is a third poet-philosopher in Hart’s triumvirate who is drawn on to exemplify the shift between the before-and-after of Western thinking. The before is characterised by mystical theologians like the Patristic St Augustine (he who found himself in “a land of unlikeness” far from God) and quintessentially the medieval Richard of St. Victor. This is because Hart wishes to show a chronological trajectory, a hermeneutic of contemplation where “ascent is replaced by modes of manifestation”, “ascent” being shorthand for early and medieval Christian contemplative practice as a process of advances, and “modes of manifestation” shorthand for Romantic and modern ways of intent and intentional observation. These modes are critical for his consequent close reading of Wallace Stevens, A.R. Ammons, Charles Péguy, Geoffrey Hill and others.

Out of this wide-ranging appreciation, certain valuable ideas emerge about these two multi-definitional phenomena, contemplation and poetry. One of the most interesting and central is reading a poem as a *templum*, an idea he returns to with summary cogency in the Afterword. Raising the mind to God through prayer, using an object (e.g. a cross, a candle) as a focus, was a practice developed in early Christianity, in part an adoption of the Roman practice of viewing the *templum*, the rectangle of sky or sacred space through which birds flew. In this way Romans could predict the outcome of battles or crops. Christians turned their attention to God. Likewise, there was *lectio divina*, the reading of Scripture which led “from reading to meditation to prayer to a dilation of the soul and gliding before God” (p. 323). While all of these practices are still common within church, Hart proposes that:

more of us, students and teachers, along with anyone who can read, can learn how to enter these other lands of likeness, often far from divine simplicity, that we call poems, and, if we make good choices in what we read, we have the opportunity to grow in wisdom when dealing with others and ourselves. (p. 326)

Hart has a winning way of lapsing into poetry even when at his most philosophical. An extended explanation of Husserl’s phenomenology ends with an empirical observation more worthy of Eliot: “Some philosophers might wish to live glassily in a perpetual noon, but for better or worse we live in a world in which shadows fall across us” (p. 81). Herein lies a dilemma, one not avoided by Hart, that poetry as an outcome of all language will not always live up to the contemplative expectation. Much poetry is not much use in this regard. His

caveats are welcome at this point, that we must be selective and fortunate in the poetry we do find. His lectures on particular modern poets serve as models of how a reader may proceed. He also hastens to advise though that this manner of contemplative reading is not bound by any one religion, culture or language.

Reading a poem as we would when, as a group, we engage in *lectio divina*, is something that probably happens more often than anyone imagines. The religious devotion some readers give to a poem, or even sometimes an actual poet, is a fairly common thing to observe in the 21st century. However, these lectures advocate a method of reading poetry that is more than simply enjoyment, interpretation and reader-response. It presupposes a reader who actively meets the poem with contemplation as the guiding principle. This is one risk in adopting such a strategy without forethought or an understanding that that is your intention. Another risk is to treat the poem as some work offered up for the illuminati. Contemplation is available to everyone, always was always will be, while the visions often inherent in an individual poem could well lead a reader into gnostic convictions of one kind or another.

A Gifford lecturer is expected to define his terms, which in this case results happily in some definitions of poetry. Hart's several extended efforts in this regard should be prized from the monolith and prized in their own light. For example, here are some lines from a whole page of the same:

Poems are not all depth or height; they have surfaces, sometimes glittering and sometimes resonant, that can beguile us and give us pleasure. If a poem leads us to reflect, it does so often through idiom and tone, rhythm and rhyme, surface phenomena, that simply will not go away. We feel them on the tongue, and we return to them to experience the feeling of them time and again. No one who has fallen in love with a poem could truly say that it is a purely cognitive event. It is an experience with experiences, the poet's and one's own. (p. 46)

Turning to Kevin Hart's wiry and vernacular autobiographical memoir *Dark-Land*, is to encounter an altogether different beast. The erudite worldview of international academe and the language of liberal scholarship is replaced by the tough existence of an East End childhood, one of insular parochialism, limited prospects, and streets the locals call banjos – "a dead-end road that ends in a circle" (p. 235). Hart's self-presentation as someone who is hopeless at everything – home, school, society – comes as a surprise to anyone who reads the self-assured and worldly arguments of his many thoughts on contemplation. To the point where we wonder how these two people could be the same person.

Inwardness is one clue; a curiosity about books and their contents, another. He admits an early fascination (a term that is addressed in one Gifford Lecture at length) with religion, even though his family seem to have only the most passing connection with church.

Complexes are identified by the adult Hart, but cannot change his lifetime perception that his parents "seemed resigned, most of the time, to the melancholy fact that their son lived at a tangent to normal life" (p. 112). Elsewhere a relation is recorded as saying young Kevin, "'e's

like a snail, that one. Just pulls 'is head in" (p. 112). Disposed to live inside his own world, discovery of an outlet like poetry may simply have been a matter of time.

He likens the sudden surprise move to Australia as going from sepia to Technicolour. Reasons for the family's shift to the exotic location of Brisbane are kept deliberately conjectural by his family, and even by him in the book, all part of the "secret childhood" aspect of its subtitle: people don't talk about things like that. This places it squarely in the literary genre known as Ten Pound Pom.

The language of *Dark-Land* is taut, sharp, short. It is reminiscent of some of Hart's more recent biographical poetry – a tightened narrative mode that, curiously, does not invite extended contemplation. The author would seem to have adopted this style of writing for the occasion, one that speaks in shock, surprise, anxiety about what's coming next, a poetry of difficulties. The pressure valve released on all this restricted energy is a wry, observant adult humour.

Yet there is a connection between the two books. They are both sophisticated exercises in poetics. That is to say, why do we make up poetry and how do we read it? Where does poetry come from? Where is it going? And to whom? Why is it different from other art forms and other forms of literature? The lectures ruminate on a lifetime of experience in how to read a poem. The memoir tracks why all sorts of hidden, private experience in childhood might erupt out of need into words of very concentrated language and delivery, and in patterns.

Philip Harvey is a Melbourne poet and blogger. His main site, started in 2012, is "Words by Philip Harvey": <https://wordsbyphilipharvey.blogspot.com/>



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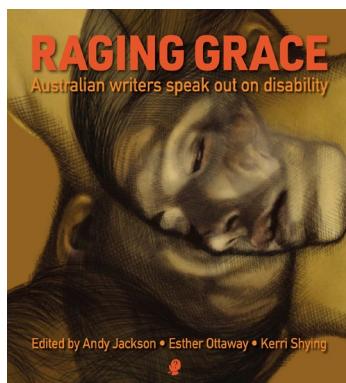
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TEXT review

The voice/s of Australian disabled poets

review by Amanda Tink



Raging Grace: Australian writers speak out on disability
Andy Jackson, Esther Ottaway and Kerri Shying (eds.)
Puncher and Wattmann, Waratah NSW 2024
ISBN 9781923099326
Pb 126pp AUD22.99

The US has *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* (2011), the UK has *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* (2017), and now finally Australia has its own anthology of disabled poets.

Of course, these are not Australia's first disabled poets – the earliest we know of so far are Henry Lawson who was deaf, and Tilly Aston who was blind. But Australia's lineage of disabled storytellers goes much further back as noted by Scott Avery (<https://disabilityleaders.com.au/oration-2024/>), proud times two Aboriginal and deaf academic. It should also be acknowledged that there are many disabled poets of whom we will never know. This is due to many reasons including lack of access to education, and discrimination at many points along the path from ideation to publication.

Still, none of that detracts from the significance of this anthology. It has a crucial role, not only in being the first, but because such anthologies exhibit disabled poets to their country and the world. It is both definitive evidence against the claim that Australian disabled poets are hard to find, and an invitation to listen.

Andy Jackson explains in his Foreword that this anthology resulted from his Health Transformation Lab fellowship in 2022. The poets met over Zoom and in-person, together and in smaller groups, considering the future of health, and creating a number of poems. They were then edited into this anthology by Andy, Kerri Shying, and Esther Ottaway, all disabled poets who each have several individually authored books to their name.

Collaboration is a feature of the writing, just as it is a feature of disabled community. As Kerri Shying says in her Foreword: “The works are unique, insistent and embedded in the physical knowledge of collaboration as lived experiences” (p. 8). Describing the group’s meetings Esther Ottaway elaborates that:

it felt, gloriously, like home. These people totally understood, when I arrived in my dressing-gown, that I was still seriously working on the project. They knew, when I wasn't present in the meeting, that I was still working hard on the project. Rather than running to a schedule, we worked in a symbiotic flow, using the quorum that was present in each moment, people finding manifold ways to be heard and seen in a web of connection and acceptance and multiform communication that was almost its own organism. (p. 5)

This understanding and solidarity was especially meaningful as Australian society switched from “we’re all in this together” to “you do you”.

Consequently, this anthology is not simply a collection of single voices, each confined to and filling a poem or two of its own. Some of these poems are written by a single person, some of which are then arranged by someone else. Just as many of these poems are written by two people. And yet others are written by 3, 4 or 5. The effect is a shattering of the assumptions and limits usually associated with “voice”. Knowing the individual writing of most of these poets I found that the collaborations produced a fascinating variety of styles. They ranged from alternating individual voices, to blended voices, to new single voices.

This method of creating voice multiplied the possibilities for content and style. And while these possibilities are interesting in themselves, they are particularly useful for disabled people and other minoritised groups. The collaborations afforded individual poets partial anonymity, while the collection presents a community of many experiences and opinions. Also and importantly, because the contributors collectively are a range of impairments, genders, and ethnicities, this anthology is voices of disability first and foremost.

In these many voices the poets write of their disabled embodied experience. Public reactions to each person’s presence is a common topic – the effort of continually managing these, the relief of being at home. Also community with other disabled people, the prejudice of medical

professionals, the constant question of what to disclose, and the freedom of imagining otherwise. There is exhaustion, such as this from CB Mako & Beau Windon: “Can’t talk/text/tell you that I’m out of social battery, So I don’t, I don’t./ Creeping through technological devices,/ I am lost and voiceless” (p. 85).

And there is pride, such as this from Kerri Shying, Gaelle Sobott, and Robin M. Eames: “watch out we’re revving engines/ we’re revolving we’re in revolt/ hey I said I’m revolutionary/ age of devolution baby/ I said solidarity not charity” (p. 102).

An aspect of this anthology that the editors do not mention but which is woven through it is humour. Unsurprisingly there is plenty of rage, but also many other states of being. I do not write this as code for “It’s okay, they are not really that angry.” They are that angry, and for good reason. What I mean is that humour is a method of survival, and this anthology displays it as part of the complexity of our lives.

Sadly, I note that the anthology itself does not prioritise access. *Stairs and Whispers* set a tremendous example here. The first item in the contents is “Access Information” which discusses audio, video, descriptive text, content notes, and biographies and notes on the poems. To be clear the expectation to follow this example is not restricted to this anthology. Any poet and indeed any author can embed access in their text. However, for a book that emphasises the importance of accessibility for the disabled community it is disappointing that access is not central to the text. I particularly wished for descriptions. It is not just nice to know about the pretty pictures, there are a couple of poems where the layout is difficult to follow. Descriptions assist those of us who are blind, as well as those of us who are neurodivergent.

Overall this anthology highlights the grit and creativity of disabled people. And the wealth of disabled poets in Australia. If you want to know what Australian disabled people experience, but also what we would like to experience, you can find it here.

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Dr Amanda Tink is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UniSA Creative, University of South Australia, and Adjunct Research Fellow at Western Sydney University’s Writing and Society Research Centre. She is a proud disabled person with research interests in Australian disabled authors, crip poetics and memoir, and the Nazi genocide of disabled people. She is currently working on the Australian Research Council discovery project “Finding Australia’s Disabled Authors: Connection, Creativity, Community”.



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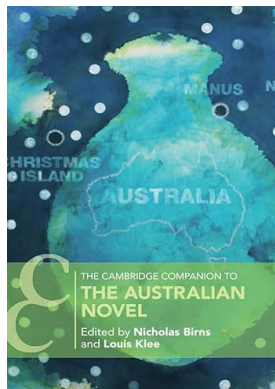
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TEXT review

Contemporary preoccupations in the Australian novel

review by Samuel J. Cox



Nicholas Birns and Louis Klee (eds.)
The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel
Cambridge University Press, Sydney NSW 2023
ISBN 9781009087582
Pb 300pp AUD29.99

It is supposedly reductive to judge a book by its cover but in the case of *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel*, edited by Nicholas Birns and Louis Klee, such seemingly surface level critique is instructive. This *Companion* is intended as a more specialised update to Elizabeth Webby's *The Cambridge Guide to Australian Literature* (2000). In contrast to Webby's *Companion*, which includes a painting by settler modernist Arthur Boyd [1], Birns and Klee's *Companion* features an artwork by prominent Indigenous artist Judy Watson (who shares Waanyi heritage with novelist Alexis Wright). Watson's work, *asylum seeker vessel* (*kuujbu marrunguja*), 2019, foregrounds the continent of Australia in miniature – faintly defined in stitched white lines – dwarfed by a looming background of Manus and Christmas Islands. The artwork powerfully reverses the repressed subconscious fears of the other that surely lie behind the brutal offshoring of refugees in detention compounds, itself a faint echo

of not only Australia's convict past but the segregation of Indigenous people into mission camps in the early-to-mid twentieth century. Watson's work suggests that such containment does not work; in psychological terms, it looms all the larger. In this vein, Birns and Klee's *Companion* explores the contemporary eruptions in Australian literature and criticism of the suppressed, the marginal and the experimental.

Birns and Klee's "Introduction" asks a fundamental question at the heart of the book: "what is an Australian novel?" (p. 3). If we are referring to the Australian literary novel, one answer would be something increasingly fewer universities and secondary schools are inclined to teach, and, as Emmett Stinson's chapter appears to indicate, more and more large publishers refuse to publish, and, resultantly, fewer and fewer people seemingly read. Nonetheless, an equally important question (in regard to this review at least) we might ask is, what is the role of a "companion" to the Australian novel? Cambridge University Press's website describes their companion series, variously, as "authoritative guides", written by "leading experts" and "lively, accessible introductions". Here it should be noted that Birns and Klee's *Companion* consciously depart from any attempt to provide a comprehensive guide to the Australian novel. Their *Companion* was released alongside the voluminous *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*, edited by David Carter, which I have previously reviewed (here: <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/JASAL/article/view/20440>), and to which it leaves a more expansive historical treatment [2]. It also sets out to differentiate itself from Webby's *Companion* by charting new and emerging terrain. As Birns and Klee declare: "This volume places particular emphasis on the modern and contemporary novel" (p. 16).

The *Companion* achieves this across nineteen diverse chapters, written by twenty scholars, writers and critics, grouped into three parts. The first section, "Contexts", begins strongly with Jeanine Leane's chapter, which through the central notion of "presencing" provides an approach both theoretical and practical, for researchers and students considering Indigenous literature. This is followed by Brendan Casey's chapter on literary visitors; Paul Giles's transnational take on settler fictions; Michael R. Griffiths on white representation of indigeneity; Evelyn Araluen's recalibration of established understandings of Mabo's literary significance; and Emmett Stinson on publishing the Australian novel. Although it is unlikely many individuals will read (like me!) both the *Cambridge History* and *Companion* cover-to-cover (with their combined total of over one thousand pages of literary criticism) those who do will note that although original, Griffiths, Giles and Stinson's chapters in the *Companion* do have significant thematic crossover with their chapters in the *History*. This may have contributed to my sense that the "Contexts" section was overall the least compelling. Every chapter was undoubtedly quality scholarly work by respected academic voices, but after an introduction and six chapters on "Contexts" I found myself longing for an in-depth discussion of the object of this edition's companionship: the novel. DH Lawrence's *Kangaroo* does receive some detailed treatment by Casey, while *Capricornia* receives attention from Griffiths, but overall, the Australian novel was largely absent from these chapters seeking to establish theoretical and critical "Contexts".

Given these yearnings, the following six chapters – focused on “Authorships” – appeared as a welcome salve, with Fiona Morrison’s chapter on Christina Stead and the transnational novel marking a strong introduction to the section I found the most compelling. Morrison’s chapter situates Stead as “a pioneering writer of the oceanic South” (p. 116); “the water hemisphere” (p. 117). She not only offers a fresh frame through which to understand Stead’s oeuvre but does so in a reading that captures the verve and luminescence of her modernist prose. Chen Hong’s chapter on Patrick White’s fiction focuses on the importance of sexuality to his respected oeuvre. This is an innovative and original reading, especially stimulating for White scholars, but might leave less informed readers grasping for something to hold onto. Nonetheless, Hong has many moments of lucid analysis, such as that at the core White’s innumerable contradictions “is a private selfhood communicable in fiction alone” (p. 144). Shifting from one novelist of private selfhoods to another, Louis Klee’s chapter considers the idiosyncrasies of Gerald Murnane through the notion of “Constellational Form”, considering his imagistic mapping of reality, and truths that are grasped “from the sides of... the eyes” (p. 156).

A notable oversight of the *Cambridge History* was the omission of Helen Garner, but that is rectified here by Brigid Rooney’s chapter on Garner’s “House of Fiction”. The “House”, loosely construed in the Bachelardian sense, offers an insightful frame to consider Garner’s work. The penultimate authorships chapter is by Lynda Ng, perhaps the foremost expert on Alexis Wright’s fiction. Ng positions activism as a throughline in Wright’s life and body of work, tracing this activism to her reshaping of the novel form through the use Aboriginal epic and oral techniques, upending engrained notions to reclaim “English” and the “novel” in the process. The final “Authorships” chapter, Joseph Steinberg’s effort on “Kim Scott and the Doctoral Novel”, feels caught between this section and the next: “Futures”. Steinberg’s chapter is at its strongest when discussing the relatively new (and increasingly prevalent) phenomenon of the doctoral novel but finds itself on more tenuous ground when trying to isolate a discussion of Scott’s fiction through said frame. As Steinberg recognises, Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010), is a doctoral novel in the sense that Scott utilised the opportunity of a PhD, like an increasing number of other established writers have, to secure funding and time to conduct research for his second Miles Franklin-winning novel. However, given that his early prize winning novel *Benang* (1999) shows evidence of being just as heavily researched without the support of a university creative writing program, the doctoral novel feels a tenuous frame through which to understand Scott’s broader “authorship” [3]. Nonetheless, considering the reluctance within traditional literary criticism to accept or recognise creative writing programs and their increasingly important place in the production of literary fiction, Steinberg’s chapter remains important work.

After the sustained focus of “Authorships” on six more canonical writers, the *Companion* departs into new and experimental trends in Australian literature with its third and final section, “Futures”. Lachlan Brown begins, with the first of seven chapters, by focusing on a region that has become a recent literary powerhouse in the “Contemporary Western Sydney Novel”. Declan Fry then offers the frame of “First Nations Transnationalism” to better understand the broad cross-national influences on Australia’s Aboriginal writers, before Michelle Cahill’s chapter “Beyond the Cosmopolitan: Small Dangerous Fragments”, once again challenges the

bounds of the “Australian novel”. By linking the identity construct “Australian” to the textual construct of the “novel” and arguing that they both have institutional links and might therefore be implicated in the colonial project, Cahill instead chooses to place her focus on the transgressive possibilities of short fiction. Michelle’s chapter adroitly sashays over tales by herself, Tom Cho, Nicholas Jose, Gail Jones, Melanie Cheng, Michelle Wright, but the most striking element is the style in which she does so. Her “coda” declares that Australian writing is “entering a phase of greater freedom in which genres blur and writing may increasingly apply poetical dimensions, historical elements or autofictional processes” (p. 255). Her chapter embodies this freedom in its very composition, presenting a strong argument for the greater inclusion of creative writers in collections such as these to shake up the scholarly formula.

Following the rich vein of the experimental, Nicolas Birns’s chapter explores how the verse novel, despite its European origins with Byron and Pushkin, is developing into a peculiarly (in its local prevalence and success) Australian form. Birns charts the verse novel’s development from Les Murray, the *Scriptsi* triumvirate of Wearne, Duggan and Scott, and, of course, Dorothy Porter, through to Ali Cobby Eckermann and Ivy Alvarez. Published just after the *Companion* went to press, John Kinsella’s recent turn to the form with *Cellnight* (2023) adds weight to this work. Lesley Hawkes and Mark Piccini’s chapter sets out to queer mateship through their examination of David Malouf and Christos Tsiolkas – though one wonders if further canonical writers, such as Patrick White and Randolph Stow, could have been employed to broaden the scope and implications. Tony Hughes d’Aeth’s chapter “Australian Fiction in the Anthropocene” is an astute and stylish overview of current literary “Cli-Fi”. However, I found myself wanting him to pursue the revisionist task he identifies, only to jettison, in his introduction: to offer an anthropocentric rereading of classic Australian literary texts. Finally, Keyvan’s Allahyari’s chapter returns us to where this review began, by asking, “What is the (Australian) Refugee Novel?” Allahyari isolates three key terms from his title “Australian” “refugee” and “novel” all carry (seemingly paradoxical) political and formal contentions. The struggles of these stories are enacted by Australia, in stories borne on Australian waters, but the characters and indeed novelists might never set foot on Australia. Perhaps most puzzlingly of all, the traumatic conditions and experiences recounted, as in Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains*, recreate in many ways those that stimulated one of the first identifiably Australian literary forms (and supposedly an antipodean identity): the convict novel.

The Cambridge *Companion*, taken together with the *History*, contributes over one thousand pages of current and literary criticism by established, and new and emerging critics. For this weighty contribution, Cambridge and the editors should be applauded [4]. The *Companion* achieves the aims set out by Birns and Klee in their introduction to emphasise the new and contemporary, and yet this aim is also connected to the edition’s inevitable oversights. Webby’s *Companion* was criticised for its lack of coverage in attempting to compress the entirety of Australian literature into a *Companion* (see Duwell, 2001, p. 126), and even with Birns and Klee’s focus reduced to the novel, complete coverage is impossible. Nonetheless, the *Companion*’s focus on the new and its form of short, edited chapters does result in an emphasis on the niche and hyper-specific, leaving the coverage appearing patchy. As a study and research tool the *Companion* will undoubtedly be heavily utilised by the next generation of students and

researchers. However, after reading over one thousand pages and fifty-eight individual chapters, each with their own framework and approach, I long for a voice capable of doing the difficult connective work of weaving it all together. Overall, the *History* and *Companion* offer a dazzling array of insights, yet their distributed approach is not only a reflection of editorial choice, but I would venture, necessity. It is perhaps representative of the current state of Australian literary studies, the humanities and more broadly universities, in which scholars are increasingly atomised and overworked.

Nonetheless, Birns and Klee's "Introduction" does admirably grapple with the task of drawing together the *Companion's* range of distinct perspectives. Indeed, in an inspired turn they return to Judith Wright's notion of "preoccupations" to frame the collection. Although rightly remembered for her poetry, Wright might well be the finest critic of the Australian tradition – certainly contemporaries such as Randolph Stow and Max Harris thought so. Although Wright's introduction – "Australia's Double Aspect" – to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1966) ostensibly introduces a monograph concerned with verse, as Birns and Klee note she turns to the big Australian novels and novelists to isolate her "preoccupations". Wright's "double aspect" is the inner and outer reality of colonial exile and imprisonment, and its counter, newness and freedom from old world bonds. Birns and Klee recognise both Wright's hopes for leaving behind the injustices and inequalities of the old world and her recognition of the problematic nature of notions such as mateship.

And yet it is here, the *Companion* perhaps misses an opportunity to tie the modern and contemporary to more established aspects of the Australian tradition. Behind the facades of "mateship" and the "Australian legend", which Wright notes are susceptible to being used falsely and shallowly, her great insight is that there lies a truth unique in its hues to this continent, which was still useful then and remains valuable – perhaps more than ever – now. To Wright's mind, within this truth lay Australia's only hope to grow beyond its damaged past. This truth was not a reasoned fact but something more powerful, an ideal: egalitarianism, grounded in the fraternal (as opposed to the patriarchal), mutual trust and, above all, equality, between, as Charles Harpur put it, "God-created equals" (qtd. in Wright, 1966, p. xx). Many chapters in this collection hold this ideal to account, revealing the oversights and absences within the Australian tradition: its overwriting of Indigenous people, its silencing of difference, its sidelining of non-heteronormative sexualities, its parochial ignorance of transnationalism, its repression of experimental forms, its complicity in environmental destruction and the societal dissonance that allows the incarceration of refugees. And yet in the end, to my mind, such injustices don't destroy this ideal, they ultimately invoke it by rightfully holding it to account.

Notes

[1] The cover image of Webby's *Companion* is Arthur Boyd's *Colonial Poet Under An Orange Tree*, 1979-80, depicting a foppish colonial poet under an alien orange tree backed by large blue skies and a white earth, which broadly can be taken to suggest the settler-colonial experience (although there is always something distended and disturbing going on in his work).

This is not to say the collection was not attendant to other experiences – merely that it is from another era.

[2] These collections on the Australian novel are also being published alongside the Anne Vickery edited *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Poetry* (which I have yet to get my hands on) published in 2024, and the Anne Vickery and Philip Mead edited *The Cambridge History of Australian Poetry* which is forthcoming in 2025.

[3] Although the chapter displays much in depth scholarly engagement with Scott’s writing, it does mistakenly interpret a line from *Kayang and Me* to state that Scott’s first novel *True Country* was conceived while teaching on Noongar Country. I believe it was conceived while teaching at a community in the Kimberley. Steinberg’s classification of the novel as a *Kunstlerroman* – a 19th century European form – also sits uncomfortably with me (but knowing he has a certain attraction towards high culture, I acknowledge this may well be taken complementarily by Scott himself).

[4] One feature I could not applaud was the note on the final page: “manufactured by Amazon, Sydney, New South Wales”.

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Samuel J. Cox is a researcher, critic and teacher of Australian and world literature, who also dabbles in creative writing and photography. Samuel completed a PhD in Australian Literature at the University of Adelaide in 2023 and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Tübingen, Germany. His essays have won JASAL’s A.D. Hope Prize, ALS’s PhD Essay Prize (jointly with Evelyn Araluen) and he was recently highly commended for InASA’s inaugural Kay Schaffer Award. His critical and scholarly writing has been published in places such as JASAL, Australian Literary Studies, Motifs, Westerly and Overland.



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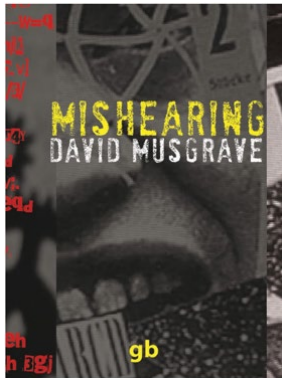
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TEXT review

Hearing the bones of language

review by Jen Webb



David Musgrave

Mishearing

Gorilla Books, Warrimoo NSW 2023

ISBN 9780645801903

Pb 90pp AUD17.78

I have been following David Musgrave's work since we were both participants in one of Ron Pretty's legendary Wollongong Poetry Workshops. The workshopers lived together in student accommodation, sat through sometimes gruelling/ sometimes glorious small-group critiques, listened to excellent lectures on poetry, and spent evenings in a blur of readings, conversations, and wine. David and I were among the six poets (with Lucy Alexander, Janine Fraser, Miriam Wei Wei Lo, and Katarina Konkoly) selected for the New Poets Series 10 [1]. In 2004, Ron Pretty led this group of New Poets on a book launch trip across Australia. In the evenings, David and I frequently discussed and debated various aspects of philosophy and rhetoric, lubricated by the adrenaline of a day's driving and performing, and I deeply respected his intellectual framework, and the weaving of this dense context into his poetry.

This sense of scholarship – a sort of academic DNA – shows up in the introductory essay to this volume. Here he outlines the experiment that produced this collection of “misheard” poems: a mishearing that is broader than, say, the mondegreen phenomenon [2], because it seeks to accommodate voice, the “sonic distinctiveness” (p. 8). He tests this out through a practice of both homophonic and heterophonic “translation”, in a project that builds on and adds to the corpus of knowledge in the field (p. 8).

For those not versed in rhetoric and linguistics, the essay may be a fairly dense read, but it will reward the effort. Follow David’s thinking as he works through key theorists like Quine, Agamben, Jakobsen and Saussure (among others), and through Oulipo poets and contemporary Australian exponents John Tranter, Chris Edwards, or Toby Fitch. He examines how 19th-century specialists made sense of language and how it is applied in meaning making. His close and careful account of the operations of the bones of language (particularly phonemes), and how they relate to poetry, is part of a rich practice that draws on the past and fits also other present experiments. Katharine Coles and her team’s “poemage” project, for instance, similarly drills into the bones of language to generate a visual representation of the sonic topology of a poem [3]. Likewise, Geoff Hinchcliffe’s “Da Da Visualisation” project digs in, in this case to deliver what he terms an “absurd production of charting written poems” [4]. Such experiments, like the experiment presented in this collection, attend to the basic elements of language.

I find the argument of this essay particularly persuasive where it focuses on language, on the material we poets use in the making – the building – of our work. Language in poetry is not only words and phrases, not only ideas and images; it is also individual letters, and miniature collections of letters into syllables, phonemes, graphemes. It is the sound of words, where the character of poets and poems may emerge as embodied entities.

And, importantly, it is about the role of both poet and reader as they independently construct meaning and affect through no more than that abstract mechanism: language. Consequently, he points out, writing and reading does double duty as an act of communication, and of physiological encounter between reader and writer. This project is, David notes, a “first step” in the effort to test the ability “to identify the distinctiveness of a poetic voice” (p. 28). Is it successful? That will depend, I suspect, on the reader. After all, if the voice of the poem is indeed that which begins in one body and ends in another, then David’s own mishearing of poems is likely to be further amended – misheard, mistranscribed – by each reader.

I came here to review a poetry collection, but have not yet mentioned the poems. This is primarily because the essay is so engaging; but also, I confess, because at first reading I didn’t particularly warm to the poems. That is no doubt a shortcoming on my part, rather than on the part of the experiment. But then, as I read and reread the poems, and especially when I read out loud, I began to hear internal chiming, a sort of handshake between the voice of the original poem and the “translated” version. Or perhaps not a handshake, but rather a ghosting, the original voice/poem hovering over and occasionally weaving some texture into the new version. This created, for me, a blend of dada and uncanny elements; which is very appealing.

I think – and here I am no doubt showing my ignorance – it would have worked better for me if the original poems had been named, if not printed, alongside their “translation”. A few are identified: Dorothea Mackellar, for example, Judith Wright, Les Murray, or Gig Ryan. But I was not always confident I knew who was being cribbed. Was that a frisson of Whitman? A soupçon of Eliot? In some cases, it was obvious (yes, that’s clearly Yeats). In other cases, it really didn’t matter: ‘Genie Wanks Fan’, a “misheard” slice of *Finnegan’s Wake*, is as lucid and comprehensible as the original; and it contains all the pizzazz and music and wackiness of the Wake.

I did stumble, here and there, over the rejection of grammatical and syntactical conventions, and struggled to remind myself that what I was reading was an experiment in prosody, and not mere clumsy articulation. The first lines of ‘Oracle’, for instance, needed several reviews before I felt I could see/hear the structure of the phrases:

What he sees beauty supplying him with
is instructing himself in front of the workflow
addicted to living and the ‘that’s what you are’
Nike’s will timing this and any new toys
expiate the lights and rains fall in lotus leaves, the sun; (p. 51)

These gripes aside, it is a fascinating book. Overall, what I felt fizzing through the lines is energy, which in several cases – see for example ‘#2 Pubic Hell Hat’ – pours out across the page, a perfect “barbaric yawp” [5]. It demands time and attention; and often rewards it.

Then the poems are done, and we move on to the final section of the book: a brief (10-page) disquisition on myth, on science, and on poetry, all undergirded by a sustained focus on the work of language, signification, and cultural framing. Rather beautifully, the discussion draws to a close by shifting focus to Indigenous Australian languages and the knowledge and understandings that are inaccessible to those who cannot speak those languages. “I want to suggest that the learning of indigenous languages be compulsory in Australian schools”, he writes, so that we other Australians might learn how to move toward genuine reconciliation through shared imagination, shared myth (p. 82). The very last line offers a prescription from which we could all benefit: “We need, for a while at least, to become all ears” (p. 82).

Notes

[1] See Alexander, L., Fraser, J.M., Konkoly, K., Wei Wei Lo, M., Musgrave, D., & Webb, J. (2004). *Filaments: New Poets Ten*, Five Islands Press.

[2] See Israa B Abdurrahman & Ruqaiya B Abdurrahman (2012); David West (2023).

[3] See McCurdy et al., (2016).

[4] See Geoff Hinchcliffe’s ‘DaDa Visualisation’ (2015).

[5] Phrase nicked, of course, from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself, 52” which, perhaps ironically in this context, asserts on line 3: “I too am untranslatable.”

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Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Recent books include Gender and the Creative Labour Market (Palgrave 2022), Publishing and Culture (ed., with D Baker and DL Brien, CSP 2019), and the poetry collections Moving Targets (2018), Flight Mode (with Shé Hawke; 2020), and The Daily News (RWP, 2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal Meniscus, the scholarly journal Axon: Creative Explorations, and Bloomsbury Academic’s Research in Creative Writing series.



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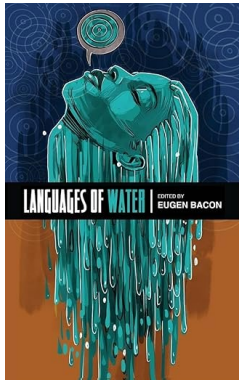
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TEXT review

Listening to water

review by Carolyn Booth



Eugen Bacon (Ed.)
Languages of Water
MVMedia, Fayetteville Georgia 2023
ISBN 9798985733662
Pb 221pp AUD44.67

It is no secret that we are living in chaotic times. In such a state, one may pause to reflect on the simple and essential things of life. Perhaps we may even find comfort when reflecting on our history. While there are repeated mistakes, there is also a determination to survive mingled with curiosity and ingenuity. It is no wonder that starting from the beginning, humans formed a deep relationship with the sun. The sun, after all, was healing sickness (sometimes true, often not true), and assisted with heating, harvesting, and cooking. Before our modern methods, it told the passing of time and seasons, sometimes by large rocks casting shadows.

The topic of this anthology speaks to another vital element of survival: water.

Water is a lot of things. It can be political, spiritual, comforting, cleansing, enthralling, fun and often bodies of it bring tourists from far and wide, boosting local economies. If, like me, you were enthralled by disaster and survival stories growing up, you saw how quickly too much, or too little water could be matter of life or death.

Thirty-two verses comprise *Languages of Water* (hereon *Languages*) and are described as an “immersion and cultural exchange” of “East, West, and Africa” (p. 9). Strikingly visual, I was first carried away by delicious onomatopoeias such as drip, burst, or surge. I thought of the burst of water preceding the birth of my two children, and the dripping of blood on shower tiles like a wet-on-wet watercolour painting, telling me that the birth was almost complete. I could not stay in my own imagination for long, however, for *Languages* was calling for a deeper swim. A rejection of shallow play, because the “Black Queen” has a “grudge” that is deep, and a “deadly” spite (‘Black Queen’ by Nuzo Onoh, p. 144).

The first geographic immersion, ‘To Write Water’ by Francesca Rendle-Short and David Carlin encourages the non-Indigenous reader like me to first acknowledge that I am “writing/swimming on land and sea that has never been ceded” (p. 16). Using its colonised name, Australia, I live in a country where even when alone in a yellow, crunchy field, the earth seems buzzing and alive. Where life oscillates between “[floating] on your back in the ocean, pushing out your chest so the water falls off and you are just there, a starfish under the hot sun” (p. 15), to “seasons when the long drought [comes],” and then to “water [coming] in under all the gaps beneath the doors in our weatherboard house[s]” (p. 13).

While learning to respect the beauty of this land and the voices against its destruction should come relatively easy, unfortunately, listening to the wisdom of sixty thousand years seems impossible for many, with vast repercussions politically, socially and environmentally. Beyond the inspiration of words written passionately and feverishly on paper, to write water is to write advocacy. To be a safe and trusted community member, as “word by word we go to the rim of sea hand in hand where we go in, we go out far, we go deep, we go wild” (p. 14).

The powerful and political continues in the second chapter. It is a science fiction piece by the immensely insightful author, Eugen Bacon. While it is an excellent work of fiction, confining ‘When the Water Stops’ to that box would do it a great disservice. Like other notable dystopian tales, it holds a painfully realistic mirror up to the conditions of society that white and privileged people like me may only now (predictably) be comprehending. As our world crises reach a fever-pitch, importantly, we are reminded that these issues have always existed, and often unobscured by nothing but our own ignorant and fearful hands. Once, the souls who were brought to be “bled for the clan”, may have been a matter of short straws and “plain luck or missed luck” (p. 19). Whether this lottery of fate existed for long is debatable, for the tide quickly turned into “a matter for those with money, or bigger sticks, to determine who to massacre” (p. 20).

Author, Bacon, is African Australian, and there are certainly echoes of both lands that feel familiar: “As the climate turned, it hurled at them bush fires that razed huts to the ground, dust

storms that swept away families, drought—all the cattle and sheep gone, reduced to skin, then skeletons” (p. 19). However, an allegory continues in which the days of expected rejuvenation, following drought, do not come, and remain as “Nostalgia, a great-uncle with empty sacks, an odour of mothballs in his breath, his eyes a fortress against hope” (p. 24).

Plainly, the effects of colonialism and capitalism lead to an extinction of vital resources and inhumane class division. Particularly worthy of indictment is the personification of greed and indifference, “the rich woman in the metropolis”, who is irritated by the cries of those sacrificed for her comfort bemoans that “there are many books about humanity, but this is hard!” (p. 21). Such sentiments, where important words from lived experience and sociological studies are reduced to inconvenience or even a form of bullying, are echoed throughout the social circles of those afraid to do the hard, self-reflective work.

It is difficult for me to not herald each, and every work contained in *Languages*, but unfortunately, word counts necessitate me to only journey so far with you.

When we think of water, what is to be learnt? Just like how we all have the sun above us, we all drink water, bathe in it, and all experience its many sensations and temperatures on our various shaded skins as if we are one. We all experience water, but do we all experience the same fairness, safety, and peace? Even within our microcosms, we are rarely free from lateral violence. Even now, there are some who hold in their hand only remnant drops of once vibrant bloodlines and communities. Kè Su Thar, who translated ‘when there are no more water-drops’ by Pandora (p. 109) explains that, “In Burmese culture, ‘water-drop’ refers to ‘ties which people had knotted in their previous lives’” (p. 110). It is said in this verse that “if there’s no water, people can’t learn how to swim, and they will drown to death” (p. 109), and if only this metaphor would enter our mind as we watch literal refugees drowning, trying for at least the opportunity to make homes in new land, and collect whatever drops are left in societies that often expect assimilation: if called on to help, what if people like me actively helped restore lost culture and cultural resources? Or, simply, got out of the way. Gave things back. Make reparations.

Perhaps if we keep reading *Languages of Water*, feigned unity will make way for justice, and the oceans will no longer roar, the clouds won’t cry too much or too little, and the rivers will carry our stories reverently, in the hope that we do not make the same mistakes again.

Carolyn Booth lives and writes on Kaurana land. She mostly writes for pleasure while living with disability and looking after her rambunctious pre-teens. She is a big believer of genuine community and has too many interests to name.



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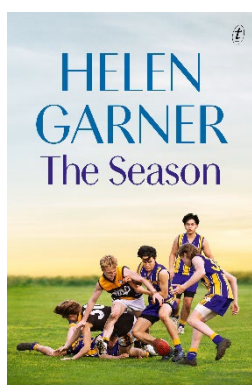
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TEXT review

Compiling code

review by Moya Costello



Helen Garner

The Season

Text Publishing, Melbourne VIC 2024

ISBN 9781922790750

Pb 188pp AUD34.99

“I pull up at the kerb” is not an award-winning opening sentence in a book. It’s an odd one for Helen Garner, the queen of sustained metaphor.

But Garner has warned (Lever, 2020) that “meaning is in the smallest event. It doesn’t have to be put there: only revealed”. For *The Season* is about movement – in sport (AFL specifically) and in human life from youth (Garner’s grandson, Amby) to age (Garner herself). Perhaps the opening sentence is meant to be similar to the moment of stillness before a player kicks the ball to get a goal between the posts: of this the coach says “[d]on’t just bomb it in! ... Take your time!” (p. 58).

The Season is structured by the six months of AFL during autumn and winter, from training to matches. Garner's motivation for writing the book was to be close to her grandson as she ages, and he is "in the last years of his childhood" (p. 3): "A record of a season we are spending together before he turns into a man and I die" (p. 92).

Garner is particularly impressed by the skill of radio sports commentators – "daggy old radio and its time-honoured power to entertain and serve" (p. 61) – as well as the written tabloid word: "I open the footy pages and here it comes again to save me, the thrill of this crazy language they use. 'A surfeit of clean, crisp waves from half-back'" (p. 84). Her book is also about place (Melbourne in autumn and winter twilight) and character (the under-16 team, AFL icons and Garner's co-observers of training).

In relation to gender, Garner states: "All my life I've fought men" (p. 2). Readers of Garner will know her take, either directly or indirectly, in nonfiction and fiction, on her father, her former husbands, her male friends, male criminals. In *The Season*, she writes of coming "back to Melbourne after seven years in Sydney, wrung out, single again" (p. 4). With grandsons, she begins to learn "the codes of behaviours they've had to develop in order to discipline and sublimate their drive to violence" (p. 3).

There's the familiar for the Garner fan in *The Season*, such as her discussion of haircuts, her drinking of gin and tonic. New to me is that she regularly sits on the floor to watch television. Her discussion of process includes mentioning intermittently her notebook which she openly pulls out to record conversations. But she knows how to make herself small-to-invisible by not doing anything but observe and listen. She notes a regularity "at about this stage of everything I've ever written": "I get scared. I know ... I just have to slog on past it" (p. 43). And there are precise details such as Amby telling her how to make his school sandwich so that the tomato doesn't soak the bread.

The book will be of interest to fans of AFL who may not know Garner's other works. It is about rules, injuries (major and minor: from disabling concussion to nose bleeds), AFL stars, coaches and training, matches and media coverage. She compares, and contrasts, the grandeur of AFL to heroes of mythology, the coronation of a king, and Wagnerian opera.

I am not so much interested in the game or its codes. My family is linked to Rugby League through birthplace (NSW), my father who played and coached, and my maternal grandfather, "Pony" Hallaway, who captained Balmain and played for Australia against England. I always felt sorry for my father who had four daughters before the time of women's teams. Garner's granddaughter and Garner's hairdresser have played AFL.

It's hard to believe that Bernadette Brannan's book on Garner, *A writing life: A writer and her work* was published in 2017 when Garner was 75, and in the epilogue to that book, titled "No sense of an ending", Brennan noted that Garner was "a writer still in full creative flight" (p. 296). But David Marr in a 2024 interview (Marr, 2024) introduced Garner, in her early eighties, as thinking "her writing days might be over". Garner herself implied that her shift to nonfiction

is permanent. But she is not waiting just for anything to write nor looking around for such, but rather waiting for something to “hit” her, trip her up, something impossible to resist.

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Moya Costello is Adjunct Lecturer, Southern Cross University where she taught writing for nine years. She has five books: two collections of short creative prose, two short novels, and one collection of prose poems (Highly Commended in the 2022 Anne Elder Award). She has many scholarly and creative articles in textbooks, anthologies, journals and art catalogues; read at many venues; and judged many writing competitions.



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TEXT review

There's something about Alaska that resonates with teens

Review by Denise Beckton



J A Cooper

Something about Alaska

MidnightSun Publishing, Adelaide SA 2022

ISBN 9780987380975

Pb 224pp AUD22.88

Isaac Greene, the teenage protagonist of J.A. Cooper's novel *Something about Alaska*, is no stranger to resilience. With a mother consumed by the demands of her PhD, Isaac (Zac) has learnt to fend for himself. When she suggests Zac visits Alaska to see his estranged father, James, for Christmas, he welcomes the challenge. However, Zac struggles with his father's abusive behaviour, which is fuelled by alcohol, resentment, and a lingering sense of failure, leaving him emotionally fragile and unable to maintain a meaningful relationship. When James pushes Zac to confront his limits in ways he never expected, Zac must summon an inner strength that matches both the resilience needed to withstand his father's behaviour and the harsh Alaskan conditions.

Zac's dad, a seasoned dogsledder who is hardened to the tough Alaskan environment, adopts the same "show 'em who's boss and they'll respect you for it" attitude toward Zac that he uses with his huskies (p.16). Unable to meet his father's expectations, Zac chooses the harsh Alaskan conditions over his dad, and braves subzero temperatures to hitchhike to the airport for an early flight home to San Diego. After accepting a lift from Stanley – a stranger, who his father would likely describe as a "whacko" (p. 83) – Zac begins to question the wisdom of his risk-taking behaviours. However, despite his troubled past, Stanley proves to be a strong source of guidance, and his insights help Zac gain a deeper understanding of his father.

J.A. Cooper crafts an intricately woven portrait of the three main characters. The triadic relationship between Stanley, Zac, and his father, reveal interactions and contrasting perspectives that are shaped by past trauma, which together establish a pathway for forgiveness and growth. Similarly, the use of the first-person perspective provides a glimpse into the adolescent machinations that inform Zac's impulsive behaviour, including his decision to abandon shelter during a blizzard, hitchhike, and accept a lift from Stanley. Access to Zac's internal monologue in particular reveals Zac's struggle to comprehend complex issues related to the human condition, such as morality, addiction, and ethical dilemmas that are more typically understood by adults (Moshman, 2008). In this way, the reader observes how Zac metacognitively questions and analyses his own understanding of his dad's behaviour. It is through this lens of authentic innocence that the reader witnesses Zac's personal growth, and his deeper understanding of his father's behaviour.

In an increasingly data-driven world where young people face a considerable burden of socio-political concerns (see de Jong, Berckmoesen & Kohrt, 2015; Biswas, 2021), *Something about Alaska* is reminiscent of classic YA novels that explore timeless themes of love, acceptance and belonging. The novel acts as a poignant reminder that family relationships are of paramount concern to adolescent development (Clarke-Stewart & Dunn 2006; Noller & Callan 2015). Cooper tackles these age-appropriate concepts in a non-didactic way, by offering an ambiguous ending that provides space for the reader to contemplate the merit of forgiveness and reconciliation. In this context, the rite-of-passage theme of resilience that Cooper weaves throughout the narrative is evocative of Australian YA novels such as *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta, 1992), *The Simple Gift* (Herrick, 2000), and *Saltwater Boy* (Christmas, 2023).

Alaska's bleak and snow-covered landscape presents Cooper with a blank canvas from which to shape an ominous sense of place that foreshadows the tumultuous relationship between Zac and his father. Description of setting is cleverly pared-back to reflect the isolation Zac feels in his desolate surroundings. This allows action to take the centre stage as the driving force behind the narrative. The preference for action, however, does not diminish passages of eloquence that are strategically crafted throughout the novel to foreground Alaska's majesty. For instance, where Cooper describes the Aurora Borealis as:

a long ribbon of liquid flame [that] starts to unravel – yellow, then pink, then purple. The ribbon of fire fades too – washed away by a shimmering blue rain, rising and falling in endless curtains. Like a world behind a waterfall. (p. 153)

The dialogue between Zac, James, and Stanley is instrumental in driving the plot, and the juxtaposition between Zac's fearful anxiety and Stanley's quiet stoicism works to heighten the drama. It is through these interactions that Cooper renders deeply complex emotions with remarkably clear and simple beauty. Undoubtedly, Cooper's lived experience, combined with his knowledge of dog-sledding and Indigenous Inuit cultures, shaped his vivid and compelling depiction of Alaska's wild, beautiful, yet unforgiving landscape.

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Denise is an award-winning creative writer and researcher, and lecturer in Creative Industries and Education. Her recent research focuses on writing for the dual YA/adult audience, serendipity as practice-led research, and crafting heterotopias for fiction narratives. Her creative and academic work has been published in both national and international books and literary journals.



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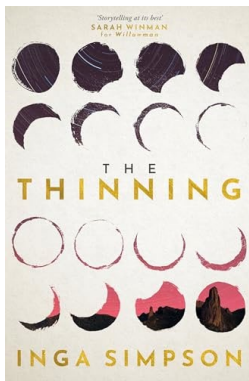
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TEXT review

Australia's nuanced book industry supports dual YA/adult novels

review by Denise Beckton



Inga Simpson
The Thinning
Hachette, Sydney NSW 2024
ISBN 9780733643514
Pb 320pp AUD15.20

Fin's parents are leaders in the fields of astrology and astrophotography, so it is fitting that the teen narrator of Inga Simpson's dystopian thriller, *The Thinning* (2024), looks to the skies for answers. But the skies, too, reflect a world on the brink of collapse, and for Finley (Fin) Kelvin, the fading stars are indicative of deeper, more profound crises threatening the planet. Thousands of satellites launched by authoritarian governments and the predatory MuX corporation clutter the sky with light pollution, and surveil a population in a world ravaged by resource depletion and climate change.

Fin's home at Siding Spring Observatory – on Gamilaraay country in regional New South Wales – is a refuge, where native fauna and flora cling to life amidst the world's growing

Extinction List. Their sanctuary is threatened when a space mining incident disrupts the lunar cycles, coinciding with plummeting fertility rates and the prospect of social and ecological demise. The rise of Incompletes – a new generation of humans with larger eyes, sharper vision, and brains made for screens – exacerbates the crisis, forcing Fin, her mother Dianella, and a band of outliers to live deep off the grid. In a landscape overshadowed by growing uncertainty, they remain on amber alert and poised to run. To protect Fin from a government intent on oppressing reproductive rights, Dianella sends her on a mysterious mission across the Warrumbungle Ranges, and the Pilliga forests, to Mount Kaputar, in time to witness the eclipse.

In *The Thinning*, Simpson creates a dystopian world that functions as a heterotopia – a place of otherness that reflects a collapsing reality, while hinting at an alternate, yet believable, existence just out of reach. Simpson’s application of real-world research creates an authentic sense of place, drawing on contemporary ecological issues, including the threat of koala extinction (World Wildlife Foundation, 2022), declining fertility rates (Fauser et al, 2024), and the impact of increased screen use on human evolution (Shahar & Sayers, 2016). This exploration of thought-provoking themes, and meticulous attention to detail, aligns with novels of a similar calibre, including *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1985) and *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2005).

The Thinning unfurls like a whip crack across the Australian landscape, delivering a taut and evocative narrative in which Simpson employs time as a motif, portraying it as yet another dwindling resource. The use of present tense narration complements Fin’s race against time to reach the summit of Mount Kaputar; and the staccato-paced syntax frames a cosmic lens through which Simpson refracts past memories of pain and joy. Simpson’s portrayal of time shines a light on Fin’s tenuous relationship with her mother, Dianella, who is torn between activism and protecting her daughter. The significance of this bond is cleverly revealed through synchronised watches worn by Dianella and Fin, each counting down to the eclipse when they plan to reunite. Through this tender connection, Simpson prompts the reader to consider the ephemeral quality of time that extends beyond the confines of a ticking clock. The story serves as a timely reminder of the fragile interdependency that exists between humans and other life forms. In this context, Simpson delivers an eco-psychological thriller that is uplifting in its promise of hope, and disturbing in its cautionary message.

Hachette Australia’s decision to publish *The Thinning* without a recommended age classification is consistent with Australian novels that share similarly complex narrative structures and challenging themes. *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005), *Jasper Jones* (Silvey, 2010), *Past the Shallows* (Parrett, 2011), and *Boy Swallows Universe* (Dalton 2018) are just a few examples of Australian novels that were dual-published as Young Adult (YA) and adult fiction, or initially published as adult fiction (sometimes labelled General fiction), and later “bled” into the YA category through bookselling and distribution platforms. Unlike the USA, where novels are distinctly categorised as either Young Adult or adult fiction (Chambers, 2014; Hughes, 2019), Australia’s nuanced publishing processes underscore a more liberal approach to how novels are catalogued, distributed, and read. Similarly, Australia’s pliant, age-defined book classifications, coupled with a low external pressure to censor content, allow publishers and

writers access to the wider, adult/YA readership (Beckton, 2025). This environment of liberal censorship allows young adults greater access to novels, such as *The Thinning*, enabling greater exposure to, and discussion around, current and often challenging socio-political issues. Australian school curriculum policy and resources further strengthen this access by including these novels as recommended reads. When explaining Hachette's decision to target a dual YA/adult readership for *The Thinning*, Rebecca Saunders states that:

The novel was always going to be published on the adult fiction list but...we discussed how the contents of the novel would appeal so heavily to a young adult audience who can typically be more engaged on the issues raised within the novel and how the story is told through the lens of a young adult character. We wanted the novel to sit on 'adult fiction' bookstore shelves as older readers represent the largest proportion of Inga's existing fanbase and we wanted to ensure that they knew the novel was for them. The account managers/sales representatives talked about how they would pitch the novel to their customers as having significant appeal to a YA readership ... This book is for everyone (and that is unusual in itself) and by specifying an age group I felt we'd be limiting its potential readership. (R. Saunders, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

While *The Thinning* clearly appeals to a YA audience, its inclusion on the 2025 Stella Award Longlist highlights its broader appeal to adults, with judges describing the dual-audience novel as 'an electric and melancholy tale, disturbingly believable but ultimately – and surprisingly – hopeful' (Stella, 2025, para. 1).

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Denise is an award-winning creative writer and researcher, and lecturer in Creative Industries and Education. Her recent research focuses on writing for the dual YA/adult audience, serendipity as practice-led research, and crafting heterotopias for fiction narratives. Her creative and academic work has been published in both national and international books and literary journals.



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TEXT review

poems of leaves and loss

review by Tarla Kramer



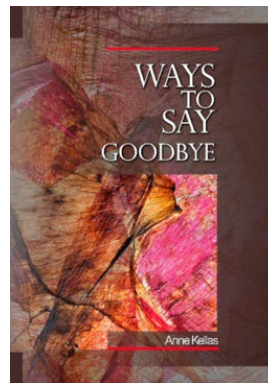
Anne Elvey

Leaf

Liquid Amber Press, Seddon/Melbourne
VIC 2022

ISBN 9780645713060

Pb 76pp AUD29.99 (AUD11.99 digital
edition)



Anne Kellas

Ways to Say Goodbye

Liquid Amber Press, Seddon/Melbourne
VIC 2023

ISBN 9780645713039

Pb 78pp AUD26.99 (AUD11.99 digital
edition)

If a leaf falls, how do we know without social media? So says a woman I know, Pat Wiseman, in her paraphrase of the popular saying. In this age of constant information, a book title named *Leaf* speaks to me. Anne Elvey's title immediately invites us to be quiet and contemplative. Let us put aside the troubles of the world, and, as the book's opening invites us to, listen for the leaf.

This first section, "To Listen for the Leaf" is about leaf-human interactions, and if you didn't think humans and leaves interacted that much, just read "Multicultural foliation" (p. 5) and

see what connections earlier human minds have made when gazing upon the shape of leaves of each species – a few of these made me chuckle:

knightly they can be
fabulous they are

lanceolate spear-shaped sagittate
cuneate falcate flabellate
hastate peltate

But no matter how close I put my ear to the plant, I could not hear what the leaf had to say about the humans, and while the poems are well-crafted and inventive, they did not nestle in the mind.

On later readings, I started to see that the simple little descriptions on the left of the page in ‘Multicultural foliation’ was the leaf contemplating the humans and making their own judgements. Knightly they can be indeed!

I fared better when Elvey zoomed out in Part 2, which concerned tree-related losses, most of it consisting of “Taking leave of no. 5”, a poem of 18 sections (p. 18). Instantly I was 11 years old again, listening to Dad shouting over the fence at his neighbour who had recently moved in and immediately razed every tree and shrub in his yard to the ground. While Dad successfully begged the neighbour to spare the beautiful lemon-scented gum that hung over our yard, as soon as we moved it was gone.

Part 3 is inspired by the coastal banksia of Elvey’s local area, Boon Warrung Country, a place my map apps can’t find, although judging by Elvey’s Instagram feed it’s a place of sand and swamp and water, and not many people.

There is a striking variety of form throughout the volume, Elvey includes a shape poem, a villanelle, the odd sonnet – although her favourite seems to be the couplet – plus several poems whose concrete effects are scattered like leaves blowing in the wind.

Parts 4 and 5 constitute a further zooming out, as Elvey ponders the future of humanity, with concerns such as the pandemic, bushfires and climatic changes. Is it too late to save ourselves? And how can we when we don’t even have the power over what happens on a small block of land over the fence.

Finishing with her favourite subgenre, the ecopoems in Part 5 bring Elvey to the sort of conclusion that really only asks more questions; in “This Glint” (p. 70) she writes: “when I breathe/ the thin curve/ of non-belonging and/ turn to cherish/ without expectation/ of return/ when bodies/ query/ what openness/ it takes in the/ already-taken – to be a visitor who is carefully at leaf.”

There is a final part of the grief process, which no one in the acute phase wants to hear about, yet it is vital to our souls, lest we sit around in the cobwebs of painful memories. And that is saying goodbye.

While Anne Kellas had already written about the death of her son in her 2015 collection *The White Room Poems*, this volume, *Ways to Say Goodbye* responds to his loss at a distance, as well as the loss of other family members as the years have passed. As soon as I opened the volume, I was taken to lush dreamlike places, the words reaching my heart in a way that the poems in *Leaf* did less often. The collection was shortlisted for the 2025 Tim Thorne Prize for Poetry and won the people's choice for that award.

On nearly every page in the first section there are arresting images that hold me and let my mind wander freely, especially in "Another Kind of Winter" (p. 6):

Shrags of sun ... Slow spring it will be ... The rake stands idle, at an angle to the wooden fence, the plastic chairs lie blown aside by last night's gale ... How rich the hand grenade of memory ... Things swim in the night like fish / through the mind's back alleys.

More gems are found in "A Document of Clouds" (p. 12): "I wanted to know how it felt/ to be completely oblivious,/ blind to the human condition./ To understand./ It would be enough, just to understand."

The next two sections contain ekphrasis works and responses to other texts, including some biblical allusions, which may lose the reader temporarily, especially if their father encouraged them to "keep their options open" and stick to maths and sciences at high school.

Suffering of course is the theme that holds it all together, and one has the sense that they are entering a dark night of the soul as they traverse these poems. In "Dark River" (p. 46) Kellas writes: "What sin have I committed,/ to be made to stay here?/ What sin, echoed the river./ Why must I stay? Stay, said the river." Thankfully such dark seasons do end, as Kellas acknowledges in Gift (p. 50): "Polished and burnished./ Empty, but filled with permission./ No need to interpret./ It shines in the sun."

In the fourth and final section, the writing is much more personal, with Kellas going into more specific detail about the losses she suffered. It's the time of putting aside all the "If Onlys" that haunt us post loss, which she does in "If Once a Looking Glass" (p. 54): "All the If Onlys came to live with me today ... They reassembled / mounted an exhibition, in glass cases."

In "Mandorla" (p. 53) she writes: "I placed you in the centre/ dressed in white./ At your side, two angels/ guarded you from harm." Lines that are reminiscent of the final chapter of Joan

Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which the bereaved must "Let them become the photograph on the table" (p. 226).

But Kellas is also suggesting that death is not the end, just a portal to another existence, in which we will be reunited with those gone.

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Tarla Kramer lives in rural South Australia. She has had poetry published in InDaily, Cordite, Borderlands and Friendly Street NEW POETS 21. Her first full length collection, Tango of the Widow, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2023.



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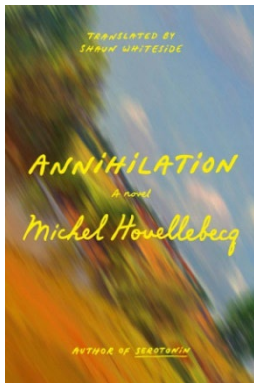
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TEXT review

Ambivalent about *Annihilation*

review by Andrew Leggett



Michel Houellebecq

Translated from the French by Shaun Whiteside

Picador (Pan Macmillan), London 2024

Originally published in French as *Anéantir*

Flammarion, Paris 2022

ISBN 9781035026395 (HB)

ISBN 9781035026401 (TPB)

Pb 527pp AUD32.70

Michel Houellebecq has been lauded by *The Sunday Times* (Sexton, 2022), as “the most important novelist, in all of Europe, of the past three decades”. Yet it was more than two years before the novel became available in Shaun Whiteside’s English translation, a translation with far less stylistic flair than I found in Frank Wynne’s translations of Houellebecq’s earlier works: *Platform* (2002), *Atomised* (2001) and *Lanzarote* (2004). After waiting so long for the opportunity to read *Annihilation* in English, I was left questioning whether it was Whiteside’s translation that was at fault or had the ailing novelist really lost his touch? And why was the Picador edition published with so many errors of grammar and punctuation?

The novel is long, rambling its way through the lives, illnesses, deaths, staged abductions and political machinations of its characters, especially through twelve iterations of its protagonist Paul Raison's senior public servant's dreams. At times I found myself, like Raison's formerly secret service agent father, and Paul himself, feeling "as if you're in death's waiting room" (p. 3).

In the background to that which would otherwise be a personal drama unfolding for Paul and his family, there is much intrigue around preparations for the coming Presidential elections. Paul works for Bruno Juge, the Minister of the Economy and Finance, who is very much like Bruno Le Maire, who held that role in the government of the real France at the time Houellebecq was writing. The story begins with terrorist hackers sending out a video of Bruno Juge's virtual execution by guillotine. The terrorists become increasingly ruthless in their destructive acts as the interwoven plots progress and the election approaches, harbinger of the pending collapse of the failed experiment of liberal democratic Western civilization.

The desert of Paul's marriage to Prudence is rejuvenated just as he receives a likely terminal cancer diagnosis. As Houellebecq observes, "Family and marriage: those were the two residual poles around which the lives of the last Westerners were organized in the first half of the twenty-first century" (p. 383). Further, he suggests that when these fail, material gain has been held up as substitute for "other human motivation ...", but "This was plainly false, and it seemed obvious to Paul that the whole system was going to come crashing down, even if one could not predict the date or the manner in which this might occur" (p. 383). So Houellebecq has Paul contemplating, rather cheerfully, his own annihilation, as the prevailing world order disintegrates with the eruption of a violent and tyrannical future.

The things about this book that impressed me most were Houellebecq's construction of Paul's prophetic dreams and Houellebecq's grim vision of the deterioration of the French health and aged care systems in the context of a cynical shift of the political centre of French and world politics to the right, ironically presented as being in order to stave off collapse into the hands of the far right, in the named form of Marine Le Pen and National Rally. As Houellebecq shows in his acknowledgements (pp. 525–526), his doctors, his references to their systems and procedures have been well informed by consultation with medical experts.

Houellebecq has often been identified by his literary critics as a right wing apologist, even a fascist (Levy, 2015), rather than as the jaded libertarian soothsayer that I read him to be, one who is, in his own final years, coming to be as much "against the world, against life" (Houellebecq, 2005) as H.P. Lovecraft, whose work was the subject of Michel's masters thesis.

It may be that *Annihilation* will be his last hurrah, as Houellebecq tells us, but I do not find it to be his master work. I do not concur with critic David Wills (2024), who writes, "there is more wisdom in this book than in any other book I've read".

Annihilation is a complex novel, one that tantalises and disappoints, as may have been the author's experience of his own life, but one that is already proving powerfully prophetic in its

misanthropy. I read this work of Houellebecq's much as the doctors in his story read Paul's face: "as if he already carried death" (p. 509). The novel's ending is not romantically optimistic. As Paul embraces Prudence on the last page, he says, "I don't think it was in our power to change things." She replies, "No, my darling. We would have needed wonderful lies" (p. 523).

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Andrew Leggett is consultation liaison psychiatrist, an author and editor of poetry, fiction, interdisciplinary academic papers, reviews and songs. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, he holds a research masters degree in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland and a PhD in Creative Writing from Griffith University. He was editor of the Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy from 2006-2011 and prose editor of StylusLit from 2017-2022. He is an Associate Professor with the James Cook University College of Medicine and Dentistry.



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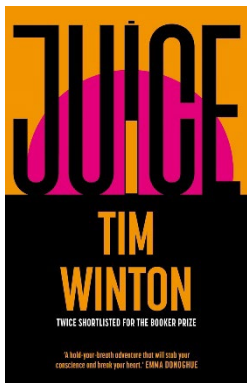
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TEXT review

“No airy daydream”: *Juice* and the modern saga

review by Jake Sandtner



Juice

Tim Winton

Picador UK

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Centuries into our future, Earth has been reshaped by climate catastrophe. Survival hinges on radical adaptation and “homesteading” in clan-sized pockets of civilisation. Australia is scorched and littered with ash. Tim Winton’s latest novel explores the apocalypse. This isn’t the Tim Winton you know – nor the one you’d expect. Departing from his renown lyrical exploration of the human condition, Winton adopts a new tone of blunt minimalism with *Juice*. A story worthy of myth. With a new style Winton emerges into a new genre, cataloguing a dystopian artefact – fragmented and bleak – with an undertone reminiscent of McCarthy’s *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006). Although, *Juice* is a true piece of Winton fiction. The novel is a traditional advocate for ecological and environmental reform in a manner familiar to Winton’s previous work. Between rich characters that consider the weight of their moral responsibilities and events of ethically murky status, he’s created something wholly unique – a saga of sorts.

Winton's unnamed protagonist is the hero of this saga. He's introduced as a man who stops at nothing, save the coming of night, the metaphorical end – "So I drive until first light and only stop when the plain turns black and there's nothing between us and the horizon but clinkers and ash" (Winton, 2024, p. 1). We're dropped into the novel as he seeks refuge for himself and a small child. The burnt terrain, which is comparable to the protagonist's battered body, is unliveable during summer and littered with ash all other months of the year. "They're just scars, I say. Burns." (p. 6). But the pair's search takes a pivotal turn when they're captured by a "bowman" at the entrance of an abandoned mine. It's this confinement that structures the remainder of the novel, which unfolds as a confessional as the protagonist recites his life story in a bid for absolution. He and the child are marched into the depths of the mine shaft where Winton uses the claustrophobic setting to probe survivalist testimony and self-reckoning, as our hero bargains for his humanity to a fellow "comrade".

Juice is a long story of heroic achievement. Central to it is the protagonist's recruitment into a secret organisation known as the "Service". And their prerogative is to eliminate the surviving offspring of Big Oil. Even after the world's end, such magnates endure in secluded fortresses where they maintain a semblance of luxury and power. It's the Service's belief the survivors of "Shell-o" and "Conoco" deserve their intervention – despite their ilk no longer functioning as oil empires. With this information the saga truly begins.

Our hero is hardened and sent on dangerous missions. Yet, during his maturation the protagonist remarks that his assignments, the "objects", aren't in fact lineages. "That bloke. EXXON wasn't his personal moniker. That was his clan name." (p. 375). And knowledge tests our hero's morality. He's confronted with a choice: live with this awareness unchanged or take action? According to the Service its cleansings are necessary, a form of belated justice. But Winton resists simplistic moral binaries. The protagonist's role as both executioner and survivor places him within an ethically fraught landscape, where vengeance and necessity blur:

But for us, the Service, it was suddenly break through or break. But we didn't know it. Not for years. And once we did, we made a mess of it. Simple mistakes. Strategic errors. And, worst of all, moral failures. (p. 338)

The moral failures are ambiguous, they aren't exactly spelt out. But they seemingly reside somewhere within the questions left unasked: like, do these clans deserve their fate? That's where the bowman becomes the novel's contextual soundboard. Functioning as both judge and jury as well as plot-filler. As a former comrade, the bowman provides contextual detail without the need for cumbersome exposition, layering our hero's story with confirmations:

That's some show, says the bowman.
Yeah, I murmur.
Fucking weather. I think it killed more good people than all their bastard mercenaries and machines.
Probably.
I saw some horrible deaths in my time. People gassed, stabbed, set on fire. But the weather deaths. They were the worst. (p. 278)

Upon this detail the bowman is pivotal. And not to the plot alone, but *Juice* as an artefact. In conjunction with Winton's writerly use of short, minimalist sentences within a fragmented narrative, the bowman permits the realism of the novel. He forces the economy of the language to become more grounded, with little space for introspection or rhetorical embellishment. In other words, the dialogue between the protagonist and the bowman serves as a structural anchor for our hero and for Winton. The bowman's scepticism and interruptions set the pace of the novel – as well as prevent our hero's tale from becoming too fanciful. In this way, Winton's able to distinguish *Juice* from other dystopian titles. By removing a reliance on speculative excess, he's able to separate the novel from previous fictions with similar settings, like *Mad Max* (1979) – training his novel in realism, supplying a world with gut-wrenching inevitability. However, just as speculative fictions are wont, *Juice* leans into popular tropes like songs and colloquialisms to build upon its world. For example, stand-ins like "rig" and "tool" are used for car (or vehicle) and gun (or weapon) respectively. Inclusions like this not only illustrate a shift in modern language for Winton's world but demonstrate his purposeful balance of realism and genre fiction. Additionally, and much like myths or speculative genres, we see the balancing act again when the protagonist recounts ritualised victory chants within the Service, evoking the oral traditions of heroic sagas, reinforcing the ways in which history is shaped and sanctified by those who tell it:

O! Oh!
 Aramco, Sunoco, Conoco, Rio-Rio, Chevron
 Sinopeco, Shell-o, Shell-o, Peabod, BP, Climate Depot
 Oh!
 Woodside, Santos, Petrobras
 O!
 Koch
 Oh!
 Koch
 O! Oh!
 Fuckers! Fuckers! Fuckers!
 Oooooooooooooooooooooohhhh! (p. 350)

One of the most striking elements of the novel is its intertextual layering. Its language. Its blend of genre. *Juice* invokes classical epics, biblical parables, and Shakespearean tragedy, embedding its narrative within a broader tradition of literature concerned with fate, justice, and the moral costs of power. Winton signposts his attempt to write the Australian myth by epigraphing *The Iliad* (1992), as if to say his protagonist isn't just the protagonist, but the hero. As a former farmer turned assassin, he operates with an unflinching transparency that cuts through the layers of deception and corporate manoeuvring that's allowed environmental devastation to thrive. His worldview is stark, his judgment absolute. The protagonist sees the world as divided between those who destroy and those who resist, and he refuses to soften the telling of his saga for the sake of comfort. The rest is up to us: "This is no airy daydream. The Long Peace is real. And we'll tend it for the sake of the common good" (p. 252).

Juice is a novel that explores complex and unknowable futures. The protagonist's worldview is defined by a moral compass gifted him through a provocative Service. However, Winton

doesn't need to interrogate the moral complexity directly – that's for us to decide. *Juice* instead compels its audience to consider the limits of morality. With *Juice*, Winton continues his lifelong interrogation of the human experience – of our relationships with power, place, and survival – but with a renewed intensity, with more juice. The novel's compelling depiction of future-Earth, shaped by the sins of its people, forces readers to confront interpersonal questions about their own agency, complicity, and the costs of comfort. This is more than a dystopian thriller, it's a mediation of history and the moral complexities of conflicting worldviews, positioning itself as a book with an uncomfortable prediction of a future we might yet shape.

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Jake Sandtner is a writer from the Gold Coast, Australia. He is a graduate of Griffith University and holds a PhD in Creative Writing. He is now a Creative Writing tutor at Southern Cross University. His work has been published in Text Journal for Writing and Writing Courses and he was a contributing author for Lines to the Horizon: Australian Surf Writing. He is a founding member of the Surf Writing Research Hub, which works alongside Griffith University's Centre for Social and Cultural Research. Because writers need day jobs, he works at Everyday Massive as a strategist. Jake lives with his wife and daughter in New South Wales.



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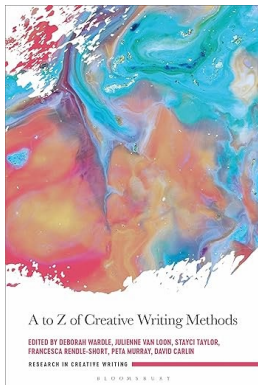
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TEXT review

‘The things we collect also collect us’

review by Colin Dray



Deborah Wardle, Julianne Van Loon, Stayci Taylor, Francesca Rendle-Short, Peta Murray, David Carlin (eds).

A to Z of Creative Writing Methods

Bloomsbury Academic, London UK 2023

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Several years ago, when I was still teaching creative writing practice at a large tertiary institution (carbon dating might place it in the Mesozoic era), one of my colleagues, an esteemed poet, would routinely welcome each new crop of first-year initiates to the course with the same piece of time-tested wisdom:

This is not therapy.

The statement was usually met with a beat of nervous silence. Unit outlines would be crinkled. Confused glances exchanged on the sly. The air suddenly pregnant with recalibrating anticipation as peels of steam lifted from a dozen ruffled take-away coffee cups.

My colleague offered this observation both as friendly advice and an implicit warning. Firstly, it was a caution not to let our collaborative learning space devolve into a slew of performative psychodrama. Writing, he was saying, is *not* about alchemising one's inner pain; a way to publicly rehearse personal traumas and thinly-veiled psychosexual confessions.

Instead, it was a clarion call for students to disabuse themselves of the romantic misconceptions that might have led them to pursue these studies. Writing (and the sacred space of the communal workshop specifically) was *work*, he was saying, where ego was set aside to focus on the material being produced. The manuscripts these young writers were being invited to create would not be stone tablets transmitted from the mountaintop of "authorial intent" to be unquestioningly marvelled – they were going to be dynamic, malleable things, to be interrogated and operated upon; unpacked, flipped over, turned inside out, and, ultimately, strengthened through cultivation. Not windows into the author's psyche, but text objects compelled to speak for themselves.

Creative writing – as my colleague's warning reflected – is a curious discipline; one marked as much by what it is *not* than what it *is*. After all, when you start prescribing what something *must be* you inevitably start closing down countless other possibilities of experimentation. You start to encourage "correct" stratagems to achieve publications goals. It's that mode of thought that has led to the slew of "How To" books on creative writing that litter bookstore shelves (with titles such as *Writing Fiction for Dummies* or *How to Write a Bestselling Screenplay*, titles I just made up that I am sure exist), tomes that promise prescriptive step-by-steps on how one *must* go about producing a final, marketable "product". But that way lies convention and a thousand repetitions with cosmetic variation. Rote ritual rehearsing itself into a miasma of monotonous mush. And with the invasive threat of generative AI looming on the horizon for all creative enterprises, the idea of an algorithmically construed "right way" to do something becomes particularly hideous.

Admirably, *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods* declares itself as an antithesis to such production-line thinking, instead proposing to explore the plasticity and potentiality of literary creativity, expanding the limits of expression.

The collection arranges itself through the conceit of compiling a "Glossary" of terminology related to the modes, ideologies and exercise of Creative Writing practice. In alphabetical order, each chapter takes up a premise – a literary technique or feature of a text – and provides no more than three pages each for its pool of writers (drawn from a diverse field of fiction, poetry, theatre, journalism, theory, etc.) to extrapolate that premise in any manner they feel appropriate. What results from this potpourri of *ars poetic* nomenclature is a collection brimming with originality, wit, experimentation, and aggravation, equally freed and constrained by its desire to be simultaneously all-encompassing and brief.

There is a concentration upon the notion of creative practice being a *verb*. Memory is a verb; notebooking is a verb; the practice of writing itself, both speaking and reading, is a verb. Fittingly, multiple articles embrace the active and enact their premise: a list about listing; juxtapositions to articulate juxtaposition. Some follow the implications of these enactments almost to a breaking point. Sarah Holland-Batt's "Ekphrasis" (pp. 54-6) is an astute celebration of the symbiotic exchange of art in conversation with other art, and the necessary opening up of the writer for this dialogue to take place. Delia Falconer's "Paragraphing" (pp. 123-5) thoughtfully dissects a structural element of prose composition often left unexamined, revealing the history and foundational stability of the paragraph unit. Lavanya Shanbhogue Arvind's "Taxonomy" (pp. 163-5) offers a roiling proto-poetic play with linguistic principles and labelling, one that starts as an exploration of the schism between a used and a known language, that eventually takes a turn toward the pseudo-philosophical, opining the decay of objective descriptive terminology and belief.

Ironically, one of my personal favourite articles is a piece that litigates the argument of *not* enacting anything. Aritha van Herk's defence of "Procrastination" (pp. 138-40) is a rallying cry for that most maligned of authorial sins, because, as she states: "avoidance does not measure procrastination, and procrastination is not equivalent to entropy. Does constructive dilatoriness not slyly underline the dullness of expectation, and how slavish adherence to unity, coherence and persuasion will blunt a wayward air?" (p. 138). To hear absolution for the self-loathing procrastinator, and hear a writer revel in the creative wellspring that is boredom, and "productive procrastination", almost justifies the existence of this book in itself. (...But perhaps I am particularly sympathetic to this argument as this review was due months ago.)

Another article, "Braiding", by author Catherine McKinnon is similarly strong, exhibiting the power of interweaving disparate but resonate narratives into one plot; however, it also voices one of the abiding themes of this collection. McKinnon elegantly transmutes the memory of 2020 and social distancing into an overarching metaphor for the imposed spaces between individuals' narratives, identifying the affinities such required dissociation promotes. And the pandemic does indeed haunt this collection, with many of the papers written during its ravages. Consequentially, the questions of what ultimately ties language and the community of writers together recur throughout. Numerous papers unpack fears that we are just as estranged as we are united by the malleable, problematised verbiage that radiates under grammatical misapplication and a history of postcolonial power structures.

For the practically-minded writer seeking advice on perennial problems like overcoming writers block or evolving one's style, the collection does offer some prospective exercises to free up one's practice. There are proposals for journaling and collaborating with other writers (Quinn Eades' "Collaboration", pp. 40-2); embracing the disposability of the drafting process (Stayci Taylor's "Fade out", pp.71-3); panning for gold in memory and evolving original metaphors (Selina Tusitala Marsh's "Metaphor me", pp. 107-9); developing speculative-fiction perspectives outside of the human-centric (Deborah Wardle's "Nonhuman imaginaries", pp. 111-3); playing with homonyms and using writing prompts as a literalised linguistic playground (Nicole Walker's "Play", pp. 132-3); and an elegant campaign for "radical

listening”, cultivating mindfulness to draw unique sense data and inspiration from daily life (Marjorie Evasco’s “Listening”, pp. 98-100).

What is striking is that it is still the advice from some of the oldest voices in literary criticism that prove to still hold up to contemporary practice. Though their names are not mentioned, Aristotle and Horace, in texts two millennia old, were proffering tips that are echoed in these papers: *Write from truth. Write what you know. Be mindful of your audience, but do not sacrifice yourself and your work to them. Be wary of convention. Be alert to techniques of focalisation and tone. Be mindful of the sacred ground of the page and the art objects of words. Be willing to play ...*

There is a stated endeavour within these pages to resist an unquestioningly inherited white western cultural tradition, and to explore the expressive possibilities at the margins of the English-speaking canon. *A to Z* therefore aims to amplify voices of traditionally marginalised or overlooked communities, such as in the case of Jeanine Leane’s exceptional “Radical effrontery” (pp. 144-6), a searing indictment of the euphemistic erasure of the indigenous experience, and the weaponising of language for cultural subjugation. The book also allows for exceptional meditations upon multilingual expression, with authors such as Fan Dai (“Writing-foreign-language” pp. 176-8) and Runar Helgi Vignisson (“Translation”, pp. 166-8) offering fascinating insight into the curious grammatical issues inherent in translating one’s own work from one vernacular to another, even when fluent in both languages.

Perhaps the most astute editorial choice of all made in this collection is the inclusion of the suggested *next* readings list that accompanies each author’s contribution. At the completion of each chapter a “See Also” list of tangentially related topics is offered, linking to other chapters within the book. The conceit presents a kind of experiential stepping-stone of exploration, cultivating that biodiversity of experimentation the creative writing workshop should encourage – a fungal growth of practice (to awkwardly mix metaphors), one premise giving rise to spores that suggest new modes of creative practice.

In his delightful chapter “Collecting” (pp. 43-5), Ander Manson observes, “the things we collect also collect us, or reveal us, or allow us the dark interiors of ourselves to extend into the light” (p. 43). His article (another of my personal favourites in the book), celebrates on the micro scale the magpie mind of the writer that can tease meaningful associations from the arrangement of details, ultimately exposing as much about the author as the objects they choose to imbue with meaning. On the macro scale, *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods* is itself a *collection* of personal expressions about creative writing, one that occasionally reveals the anxiety that still remains in the discourse surrounding this field. Creative writing instructors and theorists are all too aware that to the ignorant outsider, the discipline can appear somewhat frivolous – a domain for dreamers lost in their imagination, lacking in academic integrity. It’s a misconception as old as Plato, who mocked the “divine inspiration” of the “mad poet” in his “Ion” dialogue.

As a consequence, the predictable gaggle of critical theorists gets name-checked: Levi-Strauss, Derrida, Lyotard, and, of course, inevitably, repeatedly, the requisite spectre of Roland Barthes – he who ‘killed’ all authors by inviting writer and reader to reconsider the convergence of implication and inference. But thankfully, many times these inclusions are more than just nods to disciplinary legitimacy, and there are some unique reads offered on Boethius and Thomas Aquinas and Locke and Aristotle, the *jiutai*, *ouliipo*, and Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist practice.

Peta Murray’s chapter (Murray is both contributor and one of the primary editors of the collection) invokes the word “Bathysphere” in a celebration of idiosyncratic vocabulary – the labyrinthine etymological possibilities of exploring language in all its assimilations and applications. In truth, it would have benefited the entertaining prose of this piece to have employed this notion of the *bathysphere* further. To truly submerge. At present the chapter is more a playful, extemporaneous revelry in the plasticity of language, rolling around in comic specificity and expressive dexterity, but one that leaves the deeper discussion of the choices an author must make in developing a style, and the resulting relationship between narrator and reading audience to be inferred.

And this tendency to gesture toward potential revelations rather than teasing out complication is an inherent consequence of the snapshot quality of some of these contributions. As each paper is a tight thousand-words-or-so long, these are not examinations that can dive too deeply into the ramifications of the concepts raised. But for the writer already aflame with the kinaesthetic glee of creative possibility in writing, this is a book that will fuel that frisson. As a means of encouraging engagement with the concepts at the heart of any discourse on creative theory, it offers a series of windows through which to begin a variety of discussions.

In their least successful moments, some articles in this collection risk tipping over into a collection of near-parodically inflated thesis proposals – lugubrious academic jargon promising portentous revelations of a heretofore un-glimpsed praxis of methodological muses – but at its best it offers playful, expansive, joyously curious invitations to play.

And pretention and potentiality working together? Without any irony: that sounds like the crucible of every great creative writing workshop I’ve ever been inside.

These are articles willing to wrestle with thorny issues that continue to emerge in creative practice, and if, at times, the analogies employed stray too far into the abstract, or anecdotes threaten toward the inapplicably idiosyncratic, that is a *feature* of *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods* more than a bug. What these papers reveal, even in moments of obscurity, is a glimpse into the roiling potentialities of a creative enterprise still mired in misconception.

This is a collection of articles that – to their credit – will inevitably inspire diverse discussion in the classroom setting. One suspects that sometimes these conversations will be in the form of pushback (or even dismissal) of some aspects of the approaches proffered in these pages, but even in such instances, the debate inspired will be fruitful.

And that is just as it *should* be in any productive creative writing workshop.

Consequently, the most interesting questions being posed throughout the collection all reiterate that writing is a space of potential creative crisis – a location of imaginative self-doubt and possibility that opens up a (hopefully profitable) means of reflecting upon the breadth of human experience and expression:

Do not be afraid to get it wrong. To even revel in the failure. It's all part of the process. Learning from what can go awry.

In that way, maybe it is like therapy after all.

Colin Dray is an author and a Senior Lecturer in Literature at Campion College of the Liberal Arts. His novel Sign is published through Allen & Unwin and examples of his prose and criticism have appeared in journals such as Meanjin and Australian Literary Studies.

17 March 2025

Dear Editors,

We are grateful for the attentive review of *The Routledge Global Haiku Reader* that appeared in *TEXT* Vol 28, No 2. (October 2024), but we write to clarify two points for the benefit of readers. The review criticizes the volume for not including “contemporary theory and practice” related to global haiku: “When the publication date is 2023, I expect work that reflects contemporary theory and practice, i.e. from the twenty-first century; this is an era that the present volume barely reaches” (Bullock, p. 22–23). Notwithstanding that two-thirds of the volume’s essays are from the twenty-first century, and some of these essays address twenty-first-century global haiku poetics (e.g., Caldwell; Gilbert; Rousselet; Rowland; and Natsuishi), the remit of Routledge’s *Reader* series is to present students and scholars with a survey of the major essays on a given topic, rather than to emphasize contemporary engagements. As noted in the introduction and extensive bibliography, there are many contemporary essays for the interested reader; however, given that our volume is the world’s first compilation of English-language essays on global haiku from an academic publisher, we felt the urgency to include the most important works on global haiku drawn from a range of time periods and cultural points of view in the hopes that subsequent scholarly anthologies and monographs will build on this foundation. In most cases, we kept the respective citation method and any imperfections of the original essays, since we regard the volume as a historical record of the idiosyncratic ways that writers inside and outside the academy have discussed haiku poetics over the years. Second, the review suggests that we should have defined the term “haiku.” However, we purposefully did not define “haiku” because its mutability is the premise of the volume: “Haiku’s elusiveness, its resistance to definition, is partly what keeps it so relevant today, and this book traces the many ways in which global haiku has evolved, sometimes in surprising ways” (p. 4). Our volume attempts to move the discussion of global haiku beyond the “haiku community” (Bullock, p. 26) towards a larger audience of those working broadly in Asian studies, comparative literature, creative writing, cultural studies, and literary studies, as well as poets and general readers of poetry. We hope this clarification helps in understanding the intentions and scope of our *Reader*.

Sincerely,
James Shea and Grant Caldwell
Co-Editors, *The Routledge Global Haiku Reader*