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Reviews contents

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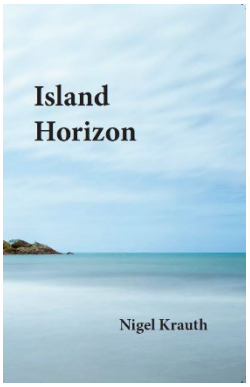
TEXT review

Contemplations on living and on writing

review by Donna Lee Brien



Nigel Krauth
Island Horizon: Fictions, Nonfictions
Fragments Press, Australia 2024
ISBN 9780645995916
Pb 146pp AUD22.00

In *Island Horizon*: *Fictions, Nonfictions*, author and academic Nigel Krauth presents a supremely engaging collection of short pieces that resists easy categorisation. In its amalgam of fiction, non-fiction and reflective commentary (in individual works as well as across the collection), Krauth creates a hybrid work that is as much about the practice of writing as it is about the content of the subjects it explores.

This collection is presented, as the author suggests in the preface, as a "mosaic": a collage of shorter pieces that collectively suggest what he "might have been on about" during his writing life. Not arranged chronologically but rather organised into three sections – 'Home', 'Overseas' and 'Writing' – the compilation not only spans Krauth's significant career, but also offers a meditation on the processes and possibilities of the storytelling he has spent that career exploring and refining. The result is a nuanced and layered collection that rewards both sustained and more selective reading. I did both, reading from cover to cover and then dipping

back and forth into whole stories and fragments of pieces. Both these reading processes revealed thematic and stylistic evolutions and continuities across Krauth's writing life. Krauth's prose style is compelling throughout. The writing is restrained and reflective, encouraging contemplation. Although the collection is richly layered, there is a nuanced balance between probing and revelation, and between experimentation and accessibility, that I found especially attractive as a reader.

The title of *Island Horizon* is especially resonant, drawing on, and prompting, readings of islands as spaces of pleasure, creativity and introspection, while the horizon suggests both limit and possibility. A wide range of locations – across Australia and beyond – are vividly portrayed in the collection. These places are never merely settings for stories, but also serve to highlight the collection's thematic concerns. Descriptions of the sensory richness of Australian environments (coastal towns, urban centres and dusty, arid regions) sit alongside vibrant evocations of locations as dispersed as Mykonos and other Greek islands, upstate New York, New Guinea, France and Bali. Especially compelling are Krauth's musings on his trips to places that were inspired by other writers' visits to these locations. These pieces include sections on writers and how they might be remembered as well as how our experiences of some places may be heavily determined by our knowledge of what has been written about them. Figures such as Henry Miller appear within this imaginative landscape, with moments of biographical enquiry inserted into what might otherwise be read as more personal memoir.

Love, family, friendship and the complexity of relationships are central to a number of the pieces. Krauth also writes vividly about the pleasures of (his) everyday life – sunbaking, swimming, drinking, sex and many years of smoking. He writes especially well about taking photographs, while books and bookshops have a special place in the collection and will resonate with many readers. Such pleasures are balanced by darker themes including racism, casual violence and sexual assault.

There is a sustained interest in form and structure across the pieces in the collection. This reflects Krauth's continuing explorations of how the shifting boundaries of lived experience, memory and imagination are negotiated in the creative process of writing. In line with his long-lived interest in creative non-fiction as a genre, in this selection of works Krauth probes the narrator's reliability and the relationship between storytelling and experience. What seem to be highly personal narratives are interwoven with more obviously invented scenes and encounters.

Throughout the collection, Krauth references his dual identity as both a writer and academic of writing. Several of the pieces explore questions of authorship, creativity and the relationship between writer and text. I was particularly struck by Krauth's probing into how the tension between control and unpredictability can be navigated. These insights into process are particularly valuable, offering a nuanced, but never didactic, personal perspective on writing. Krauth also contemplates the constraints imposed by the institutional context of the university, and the ethical and legal issues involved in representing real people and events in creative texts. From musings on writing about the self and the self-imposed limits that come into play to references to the Demidenko controversy, the collection contributes to ongoing discussions about truth and authorial responsibility.

It is clear from this review that I loved *Island Horizon.* Fascinatingly, Krauth's distinct voice remains consistent across works spanning some five decades and provides a unifying thread across the collection, even as the pieces themselves are diverse in form, content and tone. Creatively and intellectually, the book makes a significant contribution to Australian literature.

Long after finishing the volume, I was left reflecting on its central questions: how we remember, how we imagine, and how, through writing, we attempt to make sense of both.

Donna Lee Brien is Professor Emerita at Central Queensland University. Recent books include Kardashians: A Critical Anthology *(ed., with Meredith Jones and Kathleen Burton, Routledge 2025),* Speculative Biography: Opportunities, Experiments and Provocations *(ed., with Kiera Lindsey, Routledge 2022)*, Paradox, Image and Identity: The Shadow Side of Nursing *(with Margaret McAllister, Routledge 2020) and* Publishing and Culture *(ed., with Dallas Baker and Jen Webb, CSP 2019).*

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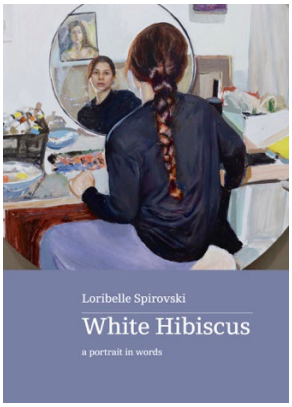
TEXT review

The painterly long plait of memory in Spirovski's *White Hibiscus*

review by Elizabeth Walton



Loribelle Spirovski
White Hibiscus: A portrait in words
Upswell Publishing, Perth WA 2025
ISBN 9780645984057
Pb 206pp AUD29.99

White Hibiscus opens to contemplations of the sea by Virginia Woolf and Sartre's seasick waves of nausea (p. 7). Placing these next to a "touch me not" flower which collapses on contact (p. 7) establishes a sense that something is amiss in the author's seemingly cruisy world. This poetic-memoir-hybrid is presented in a fragrant puff of recurring memories, as Spirovski embarks upon a pre-pandemic sea journey. She is the travelling companion of her musical partner, who is the cruise ship 'Talent'. Almost voyeuristically, Spirovski observes a working life in scenes reminiscent of a visit to a Murakami jazz club. Sailing from the Cook Islands to Samoa and French Polynesia (p. 136), the author reimagines voyages once taken by her mother, who was a Filipino singer – and her father, who was, among other things, an engineer from Belgrade. Though young Loribelle longs to meet him, she must wait, and wait, and wait.

Deliberations wander delicately down many pages the way "mosquito coils" of smoke linger in still air (p. 30). This is perhaps similar to the way Spirovski's fingers trace the contours of a face in her painted portraits – one of which recently won the People's Choice in the Archibald Prize.

While drifting through pre-Covid seas, the author remembers hearing stories of the year she shared her mother's birthday from inside her belly. During the pregnancy, her mother grazed on "tinapa flesh" (p. 21) and salty "sour mangoes" (p. 21), resting under the "Bani trees" after work (p. 21). She restricted her gaze to beautiful things so that her child, in mythological turn, may be born beautiful (p. 22).

Spirovski's thirtieth birthday is transited while the ship crosses the South Pacific. Ragù and confit duck are flown across seas to the plate (p. 41), as fussy reviews penned by professional cruisers toss their confetti of voyage experiences.

Her family stretches from Macedonia, to Serbia, to the Philippines and Australia – a kinship network which is divided by visas, by labour, and the long history of Filipino women who become a serving class to passengers onboard ships similar to the one Spirovski is travelling on. Her homeland in Santa Ana, Manila (p. 56) is remembered as place for "basketball, boxing and beauty pageants". As an aspiring Little Miss Philippines, Spirovski is offered a consolation prize of a baby macaque which seems to have fallen out of a banana tree. But that sea-sick sense of nausea soon returns when she takes a ride in her father's taxi, and a sense of something darker haunts the delicate threads which meander down the page.

As her beloved recalls the Filipino nanny who attended his family in childhood, Spirovski remembers waiting for the care packages her father used to send. Her family was divided by seas, by circumstance and by status (pp. 68, 79).

Spirovski allows her language, like her identity, to slip in and out of Cyrillic scripts and Filipino, as the book's orientation drifts from English to Tagalog. Like Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* calmly travelling ever onwards unaware of his predicament, the world beyond Spirovski's ship is rapidly succumbing to Covid-19. Despite this, she and her musical man travel on, unaware of the years that will be lost before what once seemed to be ordinary life can resume.

Travelling through golden fields of Australian sunflowers with her father, Spirovski remembers asking for sunflower seeds as a child, simply because she could read their name in English (p. 123). Here, the prose slows into single-file lines which glide over difficult terrain, without ever becoming a victim of whatever it is she finds troubling.

The cover of *White Hibiscus* presents *Las Meninas* – a portrait painted by Spirovski, which invokes Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting of the same name. Though neither artist claims to present a self-portrait, both paint themselves into the painting in a way which seems to ask who is looking at who? These questions bring to life the book's subtitle, *A Portrait in Words*, in a

work which reflects how a life is both seen and framed, depending on whose perspective is inside, or left slightly outside of the story.

While her cruise ship musician is never directly named, a wider reading of Spirovski's career makes him instantly recognisable as the classical pianist Simon Tedeschi. In the post-Covid years when *White Hibiscus* was written, Tedeschi also produced powerful writing, receiving the Calibre Essay Prize for "This Woman My Grandmother". The ellipsis she creates by gently refusing to fully name him allows Spirovski to explore this partnership without deferring to Tedeschi's celebrity. As a result, *White Hibiscus* remains steadfastly, Spirovski's story.

Her use of broken lines creates a sense of dispersal not unlike Willo Drummond's viperously seeding mangroves in 'Propagules for Drift and Dispersal' (p. 15). Spirovski's prose soon resumes once the tide changes, and complex memories can safely recede.

This evocative debut resists tidy resolution and is the more memorable for it. It is a fine hybrid of poetic memoir and prose poetry which presents a playful handling of – at times – tough material. It will appeal to readers interested in the poetics of life behind the closed curtains on the many public stages of creative life. How do artists feed themselves between gigs? How do they get by when a global pandemic means there are no gigs – a situation which continues for so many years that an extraordinary pivot of talents soon becomes essential?

Most of all, it dispels the myth of diaspora. For here, there is no convenient single port of origin or destination from which to situate the narrator's perspective. Instead, there is a snapshot of a world where moneyed elites continue to live side-by-side the kitchen staff whose hands provide the invisible labour which makes decadent lives of comfort possible. This is rendered in the velum and buttery oils of a robust, yet relaxed and lyrical prose which still calls me back many weeks after my first read.

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Elizabeth Walton is a writer and musician who has been anthologised and shortlisted for many literary prizes. Her poetry cycle How to Read a City, Your Place of Last Resort *will be published by 5 Islands Press in 2026. She is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Macquarie University.*

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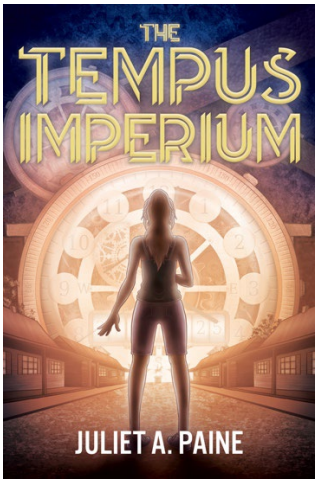
TEXT review

Time is a powerful motivator for Young Adult readers

review by Denise Beckton



Juliet A. Paine
The Tempus Imperium
Rhiza Press, Chinchilla QLD 2024
ISBN 9781761111648
Pb 312pp AUD22.95

When Charlie Lamp's grandmother dies, leaving her a sophisticated watch, the seventeen-year-old discovers that the gift is not merely an heirloom, but a time-travel device capable of altering time. The mysterious watch, known as The Tempus Imperium, is a vessel into a world where Charlie encounters the Temporal Sinistrum, a secretive agency tasked with upholding the integrity of the world's historical timeline. Her grandmother, a revered agent of the Temporal Sinistrum, is murdered, and Charlie must follow in her footsteps through time to solve the mystery of her death. In an adventure where time is both a measurement and a battlefield,

Charlie journeys from 1966 Australia to the post-apocalyptic wasteland of 2120 Los Angeles in a quest to save humanity.

Juliet A. Paine's *The Tempus Imperium* can be viewed as a contemporary counterpart to H. G. Wells' classic novel *The Time Machine* (1895), both in its appeal to a Young Adult (YA) audience, and its use of time travel as a metaphor for social commentary. However, Paine's novel distinguishes itself through its structural complexity, employing non-linear time jumps that transverse multiple historical eras. Where author Audrey Niffenegger (*The Time Traveller's Wife*, 2005) favours simplicity in time-travel narratives, observing that "if I had produced a super-complicated Hitchcockian plot, every reader would just lose the plot" (2015), Paine's more complex structure achieves comparable clarity, interweaving themes and plot with the coherence of a Celtic knot. Paine explains that she "[boringly] used Excel for this, but it gave me the space to plot out historical events as well as the dystopia of the Fulcrum. I could also map the life spans of certain characters against like Penny, Charlie's grandmother" (2024). In this way, the author avoids unintentional paradoxes by orchestrating intricate temporal sequences, and integrating historical events with a central plot that sees Charlie navigate time travel to evade the villainous "syneghasts", solve her grandmother's murder, and save humanity from post-apocalyptic demise.

Leaning into her credentials as a poet, Paine creates imagery that compliments both exposition and action scenes. The juxtaposition of banal 1966 Australia with a desolate 2120 Los Angeles, alongside the disparate environments of the London Blitz and the Chernobyl disaster creates a poetic, rhythmic tension throughout the novel. Similarly, her use of neologisms to label objects, organisations, and elements characteristic of the genre – such as "The Tempus Imperium" (Latin for "time is power") – is appropriately restrained, and carefully balances world-building schemas with semantic relevance.

Fast-paced and engaging, *The Tempus Imperium* serves as both a "reading for pleasure" and educational resource, offering significant interdisciplinary value, with opportunities for teaching across the Humanities and Social Science (HASS), Science, and Literature. Publisher, Ashton Scholastic (2024) recommends the novel for lower to mid-secondary readers, with supporting Teaching Notes that emphasise critical thinking and comprehension skills that extend beyond literal and inferential understanding, to encompass sophisticated evaluative reasoning. Evaluative comprehension skills, for example, can be honed by exploring the conflict between Temporal Sinistrum's doctrine of non-interference, grounded in an "ends justifies the means" philosophy, and Charlie's empathy and desire for justice – a dilemma that ultimately forces her to choose between the people she loves and the survival of the human race.

Juliet A. Paine successfully grounds *The Tempus Imperium* in the rural landscapes of South Australia with detailed descriptions that create a tangible sense of place. By foregrounding aspects of Charlie's practical upbringing, Paine develops a plausible protagonist in Charlie, equipping her character with the necessary independence, self-reliance, and resilience to navigate and resolve the novel's temporal and moral challenges. Even as the narrative shifts

across contrasting scenes of time and location, Paine maintains authenticity by anchoring readers through sensory detail, cultural markers, and diverging character perspectives. Further to this, the author successfully combines elements of realism, dystopia, and science fiction to guide the narrative without dislocating the reader.

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Denise Beckton is an award-winning creative writer and researcher, currently lecturing 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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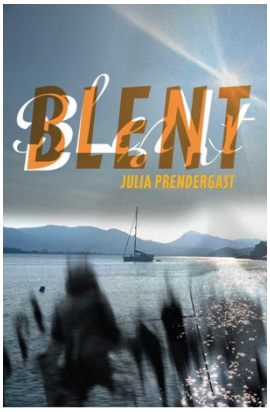
TEXT review

Experimental realism and hybrid writing

review by Jen Webb



Julia Prendergast
Blent
Spineless Wonders, Strawberry Hills NSW 2025
ISBN 9780987535559
Pb 80pp AUD24.95

Blent is Julia Prendergast's most recent sole-authored creative volume, continuing the work she started in *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* (UWAP, 2019) and developed in *Bloodrust and Other Stories* (Spineless Wonders, 2022). I say "creative volume" rather than "novel" or "short story collection" because her oeuvre does not fit seamlessly into any of the conventional typologies of publication. When I read her writing, I am reading work that is not "reined in" (to use Derrida's term) by the laws of genre (Derrida, 1980, p. 60).

Like her earlier books, *Blent* sidesteps formal expectations, and works innovatively with language, image and affect. To some extent it meets the expectations of the novella – primarily by being longer than a short story, shorter than a novel – but it does not comply with other

generic rules. For example, it contains a number of storylines, it has no specific turning point, and does not follow a formal schematic structure (Fuchs, 2019, p. 400; Hawthorn, 2017, p. 36). Rather than just a truncated novel, it is a work of hybrid literature that, like the Tardis, is much larger on the inside. *Blent* accommodates literary fiction, autofiction, epistolary fiction, travel writing, quest narrative and love story. It spans decades and hemispheres, shifts from voice to voice; and explores topics as diverse as family life, social politics, culinary traditions, memory and forgetting, and the slipperiness of language. And it is a designed book: beautifully laid out, and making productive use of typefaces for the different modes and voices in this text.

Its various threads interweave, intersect, and overlap to tell the stories of two key characters, Mae and June. They are women with huge appetites for life, and bound together by 30 years of connection, love, confusion, and misunderstandings – all those features that constitute a long-term important relationship. Mae has gone missing; June has gone hunting for Mae. To do this, she must cross hemispheres and time zones, move from Melbourne – a capital city on a continent – to Neorio – a village on the island of Poros. She must leave all her responsibilities and all her loved ones. And while this prospect offers some relief (she is after all living with all her adult children, and with the tensions and pleasures that involves), it is a tearing away of one of her selves in order to find another self.

Blent is a book of fragments, comprised of direct and indirect dialogue, journal entries, brief emails, and internal monologues. It evokes, throughout, the fragmentary nature of life, which is an effect of the many (too many) people we love, or for whom we are responsible; the many demands made of us; the many memories that keep tapping us on the shoulder; the many longings and yearnings and desires that are the product of being alive.

It is also a remarkably embodied book: both Mae and June live fully in their bodies. For both women, there is sex and childbirth, breast feeding, nappy changing, menstrual and post-parturition bleeding; there is masses of food, vividly described, and alcohol, and swimming in Greek seas, and sleeping or being unable to sleep. The kaleidoscopic nature of the writing produces a visceral effect: I felt all this in my own body as I read the words.

And it is a writer's story. It explores the solace of writing, and of reading others' writing. It considers how we write, and how we might write in ways that won't harm others. It responds to questions about the work of writing; and why it is that we writers might choose this life. And it exemplifies these challenges in its own lush, evocative style and voice.

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Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of Canberra. Her research and practice address creativity, representation and material poetics. Recent publications include Gender and the Creative Labour Market *(with S Brook, Palgrave, 2022), and the poetry collections* Flight Mode *(Recent Works Press, 2020), and* The Daily News *(Recent Works Press, 2024; shortlisted for the ACT Poetry Book of the Year 2025). She is co-editor of the journals* Meniscus *and* Axon: Creative Explorations.

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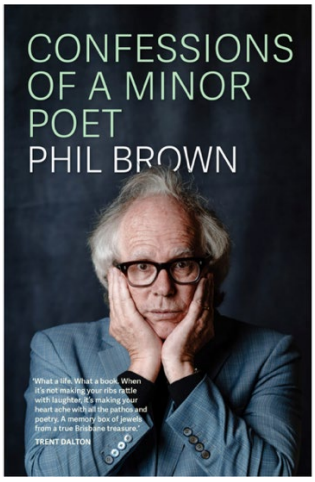
TEXT review

No minor memoirist

review by Andrew Leggett



Phil Brown
Confessions of a Minor Poet
Transit Lounge, Melbourne VIC 2025
ISBN 9781923023413
Pb 266pp AUD32.99

Brisbane journalist Phil Brown is making a splash in the field of memoir. His *Confessions of a Minor Poet* follows three previous such volumes: *Travels with My Angst, Any Guru Will Do* and *The Kowloon Kid.* He has also published two collections of poetry: *Plastic Parables* and *An Accident in the Evening.*

Brown graces us with the self-effacing humour of his literary adventures across the three eastern mainland states, from the 1970s to the present. He carries this with the apparent ease of a surfer riding a tube in the line-up off Fifth Avenue, Broadbeach, where he was a more frequent attender than at Miami State High. During his final year there, Brown's career as a poet began

with the publication of a lyric drawn on the back of a surfboard.

Brown cites numerous influences, including a high school English teacher who encouraged his writing. When Brown decided, "in the absence of any real ambition," (p. 16) on a literary career, with journalism as entrée via study at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education in Toowoomba, he was encouraged by John McLaren, one time editor of *Overland* and founding editor of *Australian Book Review,* who advised him to attend Bruce Dawe's lectures. Brown first encountered Bruce Dawe when the poet and educator gave a reading at Miami High School, but it was at the DDIAE that Dawe's influence on Brown's literary production became significant. "Literature with Bruce Dawe was a revelation" (p. 32).

Brown confesses: "I was on a self-destructive bent that suited my poetic aspirations" (p. 39). "The whole experience of being at DDIAE was turning me into someone who might well qualify for admission to some place called The Institute" (p. 46). He acknowledges, with regret, "I had to relinquish my studies with Bruce because I just wasn't coping" (p. 47). After Brown left, with "half a Bachelor of Arts" (p. 47), the friendship with Dawe continued, a correspondence of mentorship that ended with Brown writing Dawe's 2020 obituary for *The Courier Mail.*

Through Bruce Dawe, Brown was introduced to Les Murray. He tells of taking the train from Murwillumbah to Chatsworth to visit the great poet. This journey inspired Brown's 'Night Ride,' the first of three poems that Les Murray published in *Poetry Australia.* Brown's gratitude to Murray for his patronage verges on veneration, but this does not prevent him from suggesting that Murray's recommendation that he announce himself, at a Poet's Union reading, as being sent by Les, was "a kind of black joke" (p. 88).

The self-deprecation continues with Brown's account of his failure as a timber cutter at Monto and his opportunistic appointment as a reporter for the local newspaper, *The Burnett Herald*, residing in a caravan "writing poems at night and reading *Anna Karenina*" (p. 98). Brown presents the formation of his acquaintance with greats of the art world as though they were happenstance, through friends like Gil Jamieson, in unlikely rural settings, as though he has fallen into his career as an aesthete by tripping over the Boree Log.

Brown's narrative stumbles into Rockhampton, through the blues of a brief career as a television reporter and a stint as a casual in a bookshop and onto a job with *The Morning Bulletin*. "With my long hair and Lennonesque eyewear, plus being a poet …" Brown tells us he was "the obvious candidate to become the arts writer" (p. 112). Connections made in that role included those with the Sydney Dance Company's Graham Murphy; actors such as Googie Withers, John McCallum, Leonard Teale; the poet and author Nancy Keesing; Manning Clark and his wife Dymphna; rock bands such as Australian Crawl and Split Enz; and even comedians Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe.

Brown resigned from *The Morning Bulletin* and returned to the Gold Coast following his father's death. He worked for the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, living back in the family home at Nerang

as “the celebrity roundsman” of arts and entertainment (p. 128). After a relapse into drink and pills, Brown left work at the newspaper to stay on a health farm in Sydney. On return, he became “a freelance journalist and closet poet … on the Gold Coast in the 1980s … you could be a con man or a gigolo or a surf bum but not a poet” (p. 130).

Brown recalls the Tamari Café at the top of Cavill Avenue, Surfers Paradise, as a bohemian refuge in the midst of his ‘emotional and spiritual bankruptcy’ (p. 142). The glitter strip lacked what was necessary to sustain Brown’s writing. When a socialite he knew opined that he would “never leave the Gold Coast,” this pushed him to “break for Brisbane and leave Tinseltown behind,” an epiphany he likens to that described in Thom Gunn’s poem ‘On The Move’ (p. 142).

Arriving in Brisbane, Brown found the job he’d been offered did not exist. He could not subsist on occasional “social reportage for the glamorous fashion magazine *MODE*” (p. 145), swanning around a Paddington Queenslander wearing a Chinese dressing gown, pretending to be “some Tang poet” (p. 144). Perhaps this is where Brown’s career as a memoirist began, with the publication of an autobiographical piece on his childhood in Hong Kong, declaring himself an Orientalist. However in *MODE*, his struggles with “depression, alcohol and prescription drug dependency” (p. 145) were hidden, whereas they are frankly disclosed in *Confessions*.

Brown was “a poet with a liquidity problem” (p. 150). Brown was saved by a call from *The Australian* offering freelance work under Hugh Lunn’s editorship in “Rupert Murdoch’s precinct” (p. 151) in Fortitude Valley, while also contributing to *The Daily Sun*. Resignation of several other *Sun* journalists, following Brown’s achievement of a front page scoop, gave him the breakthrough he needed to obtain permanent employment, financial stability and the opportunity to hang out at the Cosmo, frequented by underworld characters such as Gerry Bellino and Vic Conte, while reporting for *MODE* on the opening of Expo 88 and for the Murdoch papers on the downfall of the Bjelke-Petersen government.

It was difficult to follow the trajectory of Brown’s moves between roles with the Murdoch press and the Information Services at the Brisbane City Council, then back again to the Murdoch stable at Bowen Hills following its acquisition of *The Courier Mail*. Brown describes a brief and disastrous intervening stint as a social columnist for the *Sunday Telegraph.* He tells of the modest success of his poetry collection *Plastic Parables* in the midst of the squabbles that occurred in the goldfish bowl of Queensland Poets, an organisation that met for readings to minimal audiences in the café under Metro Arts in Edward Street, Brisbane.

In *Confessions*, Brown makes few references to relationships with women prior to his marriage. He also has little to say regarding the early burgeoning of the relationship with Sandra McLean, whom he introduces as friend and colleague, then wife and declared love of his life, a woman for whom he expresses his passion quietly while praising her support of his recovery from addictions, inspiration of his creative work and stabilising force in his journalistic work. Brown writes fondly of their time travelling in Nepal, working in Melbourne and returning to Brisbane together, where they have each continued their careers while raising a son. Once the

relationship with McLean is introduced, the tone of the work changes from its previous self-deprecation and despair to one of faith, hope and purpose.

I found myself disagreeing with criticism Brown told me he encountered at a reading where his work was featured at Books on Stones. “You should have stuck to journalism!” was the unkind comment offered. Phil Brown’s has been a quietly distinguished career as a journalist, and a modest one as a poet. As autobiographical writer, he excels, in the crucible that grinds this account of his struggle to generate meaning out of the banality of a journalistic life.

Andrew Leggett is a Queensland-based author and editor of fiction, poetry, interdisciplinary academic papers, reviews and songs. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, Andrew holds a research master’s degree in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland and a PhD in Creative Writing from Griffith University. His latest book is In Dreams and Other Stories *(Ginninderra Press, 2026). He is an Associate Professor with the James Cook University College of Medicine and Dentistry.*

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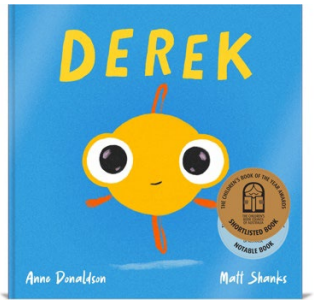
TEXT review

Championing children's communicative and courageous curiosity

review by Mellie Green



Anna Donaldson (author)
Matt Shanks (illustrator)
Derek
Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, Sydney NSW 2025
ISBN 9781761215537
Pb 32pp AUD24.95

This Children's Book Council of Australia shortlisted *Early Childhood Book of the Year* work is a joy to share with young children. The cover, with its monolexical title, *Derek*, places the eponymous aquatic protagonist immediately front and centre. The CVCVC pattern in the capitalised DEREK is visually satisfying. The high chromatic contrast of the golden yellow fish against the cerulean sea creates strong visual vibrancy. The exaggeration of his big googly eyes invites an immediate sense of playfulness; we're already hooked on Derek as an affective and expressive presence.

An onomastic consideration reveals that the name Derek means "ruler of the people" (*Behind the Name*, 2024). This etymology carries gentle irony when attributed to a small fish. The name peaked in popularity in 1987, possibly carrying intergenerational resonance for adult bedtime

readers. In this way, the name contributes to the interplay between the everyday and the extraordinary.

Derek offers young readers a refreshing foray into world-oriented wonder. Rather than directing children towards predetermined meanings, the text encourages readers in *how to think* – rather than *what to think*. This emphasis is realised through Derek's inquisitive temperament. In a world awash with worries about excessive screen time and its impact on children's social interaction and communication skills, Derek functions as the antithesis, embodying a desirable form of sociability grounded in curiosity and active inquiry. His persistent questioning functions as the bedrock of interpersonal engagement:

> Why is the universe round?
> Why is the earth pink?
> Where do bubbles come from? (pp. 2–3)

This defining characteristic then becomes a naming refrain:

> So Derek, **the fish with many questions**, decided to make contact with the big creatures that appeared above (p. 10).
> So Derek, **the fish with many questions**, decided to see for himself. (p. 18)

This recurring appositive phrase with prepositional expansion deserves attention. It mirrors a discourse pattern characteristic of everyday gossip, where identity is constructed through relational labelling (e.g., the one with the big hair, the one who ran off with the milkman…). It locates Derek within recognisable practices of social interaction, positioning questioning as a constitutive feature of relational exchange. The text exhibits patterned variation across its structure, including repetitions and playful reworkings of previous questions.

In a Deweyan (1934) sense of "the live creature" (p. 15), this curiosity impels action. The non-agentive entities of a shell, plant, and rock contrast markedly with Derek's drive and dynamism. As Derek enacts a series of spectacular stunts in close proximity to the human shop assistants, their hyperfixation on a phone screen is ironically dismissed as evidence of "a short attention span" (p. 13). Then a boundary-crossing, liminal moment is followed by a climactic double-page spread, intensified by a striking economy of language: just one word: "Splash!" (p. 26).

For the reader, this pivotal, watershed moment invokes an immediate stream of questions - Wait..? What..? Who..? How..? And, on cue, the next double-page spread presents a barrage of questions about the new world Derek now inhabits. These include that time-honoured perennial favourite: "Where do babies come from?" (p. 29).

Finally, the text reveals the joy of social interaction, with Derek now appreciating his newfound familial company. In this way, the narrative resists didactic closure, instead promoting further inquiry, dialogue, and relational connection. At a time when children's experiences are increasingly shaped by prescriptive curricular and mediated forms of interaction, *Derek* offers

a subtle yet powerful reassertion of curiosity – and wonder − as central to both thinking and being with others. It is this commitment to questioning as a social and intellectual practice that marks the text as a timely and significant contribution to contemporary children's literature.

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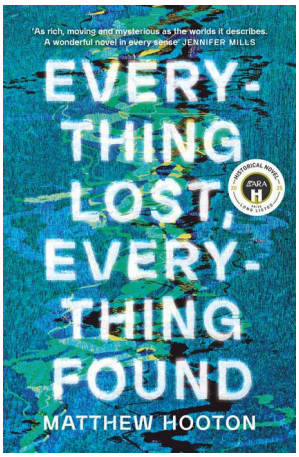
TEXT review

Into an Amazonian Heart of Darkness

review by Charlie de Salis



Matthew Hooton
Everything Lost, Everything Found
Fourth Estate, Australia 2025
ISBN 9781460765869
Pb 304pp AUD34.99

Matthew Hooton's third novel, *Everything Lost, Everything Found* presents a haunting and emotionally resonant portrait of Jack McDonald, a stubbornly independent late octogenarian whose beloved wife, Gracie, lies dying in a hospice. Set in the final year of the last millennium, Jack's life has been defined by the childhood trauma of his mother's death in the surreal Amazonian colony of Fordlandia, her arm torn off by a caiman, and his father's consequent descent into madness. Moving between the post-industrial desolation of the present in Jack's hometown, Muskinaw, and his memories of Fordlandia, Hooton explores the consequences of childhood trauma and the relationship of memory and time as we grow old. In Jack McDonald Hooton deftly manifests the tension between the interior universe of self and the

phenomenological being we present to the world. Fordlandia now exists only in his memories and will die with him; we are each of us, Hooton's novel suggests both irredeemably alone and universes unto ourselves.

Through Jack's memories of Fordlandia, Hooton shines the harsh Amazonian sun on the destructive hubris of American capitalism, with its evangelical rhetoric, ruthless exploitation of people and resources, and flirtations with fascism. However, as Hooton shows, American capitalism has inflicted these crimes on its own people in Muskinaw, part of the rustbelt "heartland" to which Trump promised resurrection in 2016. Ford's utopian capitalism was ruthless and mechanistic; and yet in the decay of Muskinaw it has proven just as susceptible to time as Jack and Gracie.

Hooton writes with effortless, immersive fluidity. After a prologue contexting the recounting to follow, the novel opens in 1928 with the arrival of Jack and his parents, Joe and Ruth, at the river port that serves Fordlandia, a chaotic carnivalesque riot of heat, colour, action, and sound, the imagery suggesting the Amazonian films of Werner Herzog. From this foregrounding in the remembered past, Hooton's narrative moves between memory and present in alternating chapters – a structure that enables Hooton to jump his Amazonian narrative across time by ellipsis to focus on key events. By contrast, the Muskinaw storyline is continuous in time, the pace matching the inexorable progression of his wife Gracie's slow dying: the pulsating heat and colour of the Amazon juxtaposed with the cold monochrome of Muskinaw. The contrast is appropriately metaphorical: real life, for Jack McDonald, is in the past. His present is a colourless ending.

Hooton's novel presents a dramatic series of turning points to frame its progression. The first is the violent death, offstage, of Jack's mother, Ruth, leaving Jack alone, vulnerable, and adrift and precipitating his father's fall. A crisis in the present mirrors the crisis of the past when Jack floods his kitchen and suffers an incapacitating and painful fall as Grace slides inexorably towards death. In both past and present, life changes irrevocably and for the worse. His memories of Fordlandia – voluntary and involuntary – offer escape, but at the price of torment.

The second narrative turn arrives with the revelation of the identity of young Jack's Korean friend, Soo-jin. To save her life, Jack instigates their flight into the jungle in search of his lost father, the only person he believes can help them. This is, I suggest, a problematic development, moving the Fordlandia storyline away from a nuanced meditation on grief and alienation into a conventional flight-and-pursuit narrative. While there is potential jeopardy in the jungle escape from Ford's malevolent agents, the conflict remains unrealised until the end of a sequence of six chapters covering their flight. As a Korean princess on the run from the murderous Kempeitai, Soo-jin feels like an intrusion from a different story. Her functionality is clear: the danger to her life enables Jack's dramatic escape, delivering the momentum of forward movement to a narrative beginning to drift in the formlessness of young Jack's parentless existence. The consequence, however, is the subsummation of Jack's rite of passage story to Soo-jin's geopolitical struggle.

The final narrative turn is the reappearance of the tortured, mangled figure of Joe McDonald to save young Jack and Soo-jin. While the imagery of the scene is striking, the timing and manner of Joe's reappearance is perhaps too serendipitous and cinematically grotesque for the verisimilitudinous frame of the novel, and Joe altogether too coherent given his circumstances. The final movement of the novel is, functionally, a coda. Jack returns to Muskinaw, and – after the relationship has occupied the last six chapters of the novel – Soo-jin is dismissed in a single sentence: "Soo disappeared in Manaus and, I prayed, continued unimpeded to Belém" (p. 283). Such cursory treatment following the preceding events risks reducing Soo to a plot device; and, indeed, this is how she reads.

This should not, however, detract from a resonantly realised character ensemble in both story worlds. In corporeal and spectral manifestations, Jack's mother, Ruth, offers a memorable, complex presence, wreathed in her clouds of cigarette smoke; his father Joe a nuanced portrait of a company man beginning to see the cracks in the lie of utopian capitalism and reconciled, uncomfortably, with having to live with them. The murderous pilot, Sam Simms, another European driven to madness by the jungle, the clownish cook, Sulley, and the shape changing Clara are memorable supporting characters, reminiscent of Conrad. The characters of Jack's Muskinaw world are, understandably, more conventional. Gracie offers a moving incarnation of someone in the uncertain zone between life and death, presence and absence; a world slipping from Jack's uncertain grasp. Haunting the hospice like the ghost from the horror of Ford's Muskinaw past, Lydia is Hooton's most memorable creation; her appearances are brief, but her bodily and ventriloquistic incarnation of the brutality and oppression of Ford's dream is indelible.

In both childhood and aged incarnations, Jack is a resonantly realised and deeply empathetic character. Surrounding him, the family ensemble of daughter Jess, grandson Nick, and former son-in-law Simon inhabit familiar territory of broken intrafamily communication, specifically fathers with children. They are nonetheless empathetically realised, and love, in the end, joins them all more profoundly than speech. The problem in the ensemble is the relationship between Jack and Jess. Her resentment is vaguely referenced to Jack's difficulty in sharing his past, but never convincingly explained. Part of the problem is that Jack's past contains no reasons for secrecy. He speaks of his shame as "a giant fishing weight strapped to my back" (p. 149); and yet there is nothing to match this burden in the past he reveals.

There is also a tension between Jack's narrating and the contextualistion of his character. Jack is a plumber, and yet he narrates with the vocabulary and syntactical sophistication of a skilled writer. Hooton defends this unlikely linguistic dexterity with tenuous references to Jack's constant reading as a child (p. 59) and adult (p. 254). The effect is an ambiguity of Voice where plumber-narrator merges with the author and his armoury of literary techniques. The problem carries over into the instantiation of 11-year-old Jack. While his engagement with the world is narrated as his perception, the vocabulary, imagery, and expression are those of a highly literate adult with full command of figures of speech. This is not to detract from the considerable strengths of the novel, which feature numerous passages of emotionally compelling and immersively imagistic writing.

The Epilogue, in which Jack flows into the past that has for so long haunted him is one of the most beautiful realisations of that final rite of passage that I have encountered. In the failed confrontation of "civilisation" with the primal force of the tropical "other", the novel stands in a distinguished narrative tradition including Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998); Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, *Lord Jim*, and *Heart of Darkness*; and Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast*. The descent of Jack's father into madness echoes the journeys of the preacher Nathan in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Kurz in *Heart of Darkness*. The doomed, delusional folly of Fordlandia evokes the similarly doomed Macondo in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the rapaciousness of American colonial capitalism in the banana wars. Hooton's novel represents a singular and original contribution to this rich literary tradition. By setting the story in Fordlandia, Hooton has found an elegantly apposite narrative vehicle for a commentary on the destructiveness and inhumanity of unfettered capitalism.

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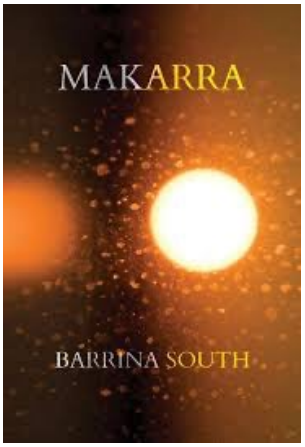
TEXT review

Healing rain

review by Claire Watson



Barrina South
Makarra
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2024
ISBN 9781763670105
Pb 72pp AUD19.95

I approach this review of Barrina South's debut collection, *Makarra*, with trepidation. South is a member of the Canberra Critics Circle and her bio records the "urgent need for more Aboriginal voices who can review and critique Indigenous written works" (South, p. 61). Although I live and work among Aboriginal peoples of several nations on Arrernte country in Alice Springs, I am not Indigenous. My reading of this work is therefore inevitably viewed through the lens of my white, middle-class background.

South is a Barkindji woman, and her spiritual connection with Country provides the backbone to this work. Her relationship with Country is far deeper than connection to place; her very self

is grounded in it. In the poem, 'First day back', she escapes the tedium of emails by lying down in her rain-drenched garden: "it's hard to tell / where the body ends, and the earth begins" (p. 28). Rain is a frequent visitor in the collection, and the helpful glossary at the end reveals that Makarra is the Barkindji word for rain. In the poem, 'Cockatoos', South describes it as: "jewels / that shower down / onto the nape of my neck" (p. 15). This sensual experience of Country continues in other poems such as 'Shifting' where the reader smells "the smoke of gum leaves" (p. 22) and tastes the "dark syrup of yams" (p. 23). The restorative effect of Country is not limited to the present experience; it lingers afterwards as: "I take Country home to bed / in my hair and on the soles of my feet" ('Unfinished', p. 13). The most memorable images in the collection are inspired by Country, such as this simile from 'Walking': "sends a shudder / like a skink whose sunbath is disturbed" (p. 30).

Equally significant as this relationship to Country are the relationships between South and her people: "lineages, like a fine silk web / that connect us all" ('Gathering', p. 55). In the same poem, South uses a delightfully domestic image to describe the detailed conversations of people exploring their relations: "each of us percolating on names, places, Country" (p. 54). The loss of a family member within such a web has a ripple effect on a whole community, and the most poignant poems in this collection are those that centre on grief. 'I own a stone' reflects on the impact of cumulative losses. Sorry business arises out of love, as South explores in the ekphrastic poem, 'Grief is love'. The circular rather than linear experience of grief is expressed by the cry of a lone cockatoo that bookends the first and last line of this poem (p. 35–36). A bogong moth: "attracted by a false moon / assiduous in his feverish distraction" (p. 36) conveys the all-consuming nature of grief. This ekphrastic poem is one of a handful of poems in which South steps aside from her usual choice of free verse. Other forms that she experiments with are the splicing of two poems and a villanelle. 'We' re-interprets Gwendolyn Brooks' well-known poem of the same title, for an Australian context.

In contrast to the predominantly light-filled poems centred on Country, the book begins with a number of poems whose content and tone are heavy. The immediacy of 'Two stroke', for example, demands that a reader pay attention to violence. Images traditionally associated with innocent childhood pleasures take on dark connotations: "shards find her feet, like an iceskater" ("Things got ugly very quickly", p. 6). Relief from trauma is not only found in solitude ('Black, dark spaces'), but also in turning the pain inward through self-harm ('Flare-up'). While these poems are important, the uneven weight of them at the commencement of the book diminishes their impact within the collection as a whole.

The poem, 'Ghost gum', is the pivotal work that melds the light and dark aspects of this collection, and of life, together. South writes that: "upon the once young creamy, pink-tinged skin / pooled blood appears / caused by old contusions" (p. 16). Is the poet reflecting on her own life and the memories of hurt that still cause pain? Or is it a metaphor for the suffering experienced by Aboriginal peoples in general: both past ("old sores still weeping", p. 16) and ongoing ("recent lesions continue haemorrhaging", p. 16). South has dedicated her collection to her Nan, Florence Edith Payne, who was born on the Brewarrina Mission in 1910. While

'Baaka' shows that some had positive regard for the Mission as, "a place of respite from the government gaze / and control" (p. 18), South also speaks of the irreparable damage the colonisers have caused to the land and waters: "farm fences invade the river" (p. 18). Yet there is hope within 'Ghost gum' too: "her veins draw the healing sap to the surface / to medicate all wounds" (p. 16). As there is within 'Cloth': "loose thread flies on its own / a sign of hope for others" (p. 29). Does South see herself as one of those loose threads forging a path for others to follow, in her work as a visual artist, academic, poet and critic?

Makarra is a worthy debut. Its inclusion on the shortlist for the 2025 Prime Minister's Literary Award is evidence of its strength. Rain can be many things: the gentle and comforting patter on a tin roof at night, or a raging torrent that threatens property and even lives. *Makarra*, like rain − and good poetry − both disturbs and consoles the reader.

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Claire Watson lives on Arrernte land, in Alice Springs. Her poems have been published by various Australian and overseas journals including The Weekend Australian, Meniscus *and* Meanjin. *Her memoir* Fingerprints of Grace *was published in 2017.*

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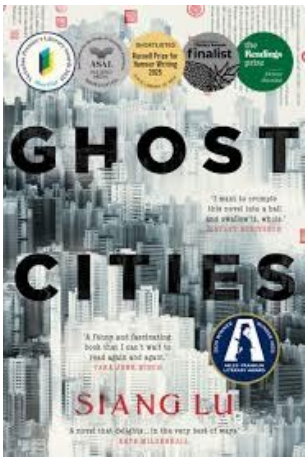
TEXT review

Lost in the labyrinth

review by Tarla Kramer



Siang Lu
Ghost Cities
UQP, St Lucia QLD 2024
ISBN 9780702268496
Pb 293pp AUD34.99

When my youngest shows me a TikTok video it takes about five views to understand it. The first for reading the heading, the second for reading what's underneath, the third for watching what's happening and the fourth to listen. Then by the fifth time I can finally put it together – although sometimes I still have to ask what the point of it was. So it is proving to be with *Ghost Cities*, which is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.

The book has two main storylines, which connect with each other in a multitude of ways, and I did not enjoy each storyline equally each read. During my first reading of *Ghost Cities*, I was more interested in the present day storyline that chronicles the bizarre adventure of the main

character Xiang Lu, which begins in Sydney and continues in one of China's abandoned cities, named Port Man Tou.

The other storyline took place eight centuries earlier in the time of Emperor Lu Huang Du, which at first appeared to be an introductory fable. I was expecting this fable to wrap up after one chapter but instead it turned out to be a history which could have been written by Sima Qian, himself, and sometimes there were stories within the fable, not to mention 30 pages of what looked like poetry, set in the Imperial Prison (aka the Six Levels of Hell). These chapters were also interspersed with missives, either from the past: 'By Imperial decree, The order of the Eunuchs' or from the present: 'By official decree, The order of the Department of Tourism / Immigration / Social Services / Finance / Circumspection'.

I just wanted the tale to keep to a single chain of events, which is why I preferred Lu's first novel *The Whitewash*. Instead, I was marooned in the past, with an evil emperor and a cast of too many characters, barely discernible from each other. Apart from Wuer, the Emperor's sister-in-law, most were shadowy.

Back in present day Sydney, Siang, sorry Xiang Lu, is propelled from obscurity as a person using Google Translate to do his job, to becoming a meme with the hashtag #Badchinese and then being handpicked by Auteur Baby Bao (aka "The Director") – who also appeared in *The Whitewash* – to help him promote his film *Death of a Pagoda*. Thankfully the present-day character cast is nice and short – there's really only Xiang, Baby Bao and translator Yuan to keep track of.

About halfway through *Ghost Cities* there is a shift in location both in the present day storyline, as Xiang and Yuan are flown to Port Man Tou, and in the past storyline, which shifts to Min Qiang, the armpit of the armpit of the world, where two characters have escaped from the Emperor into the magic realism section of the book. Min Qiang is also the village where the ancestors of Xiang Lu came from.

While the missives contribute to the book being a bumpy read, they tell the story of Port Man Tou as it descends into a dystopia ruled by Baby Bao, who becomes so despotic he starts to resemble the person he claims he is descended from, the Emperor of the eight centuries past, on whom his film *Death of a Pagoda* is based.

The whole time I was pondering the fact that this book won the 2025 Miles Franklin award, as Australia appears to have a very minor role for "a novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases" (Perpetual Philanthropic Services, 2026).

One of the endorsements describes it as an "Australian Classic", yet seventy-five percent of the action takes place in China. But perhaps it's a matter of perspective – while to me both of Siang Lu's novels are international stories, to a non-Australian they probably seem as Aussie as the humble meat pie.

I am also guilty of forgetting how many Chinese immigrants built colonial Australia. Reading the Sydney section of the book also took me back to my formative years a few times, to a school excursion to see the Terracotta Warriors when they toured Australia, and to visits to the Garden of Friendship in Sydney.

It was on the second reading that the book started to cohere, and this time I enjoyed the "shadow history" section more. Even if I had to jot down each character's name and what they did! It also began to sparkle with wry humour, "But Ah Gong's wife – Ai Leng – was dead or dying (he was not quite sure which)" (p. 140).

In comparison, the present day storyline seemed a little lacklustre, as Xiang and Yuan get to know each other during visits to art galleries and museums, although they do have some nice discussions about art and how cities shape their people etc. Xiang is a character who does not appear to have much agency, except for when he utters the immortal lines, "Let's take the bus today" (p. 245) or "we need to sleep together" (p. 210). Yuan is quick to understand what makes Xiang tick while remaining unfathomable – and is still drawn to him. And the small things that I overlooked the first time round began to give me a few clues as to what the hell Siang Lu was doing, such as a reviewer of *Death of a Pagoda* who writes:

> These two competing storylines appear to have nothing in common other than their own poetic resonance, ah, but you, the avid filmgoer, the understander of tropes, have been primed to anticipate their neat intersection, as per some shitty Babel or Crash type deal. If that is you, then prepare for great disappointment … (p. 21)

How cleverly the author tapped into what I thought of his book. To which Baby Bao might say, "hahaha!!!"

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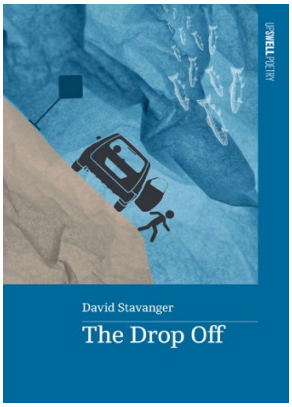
TEXT review

Precarious: Poetic Edges in David Stavanger's *The Drop Off*

review by Elizabeth Walton



David Stavanger
The Drop Off
Upswell Publishing, Perth, WA 2025
ISBN 9780645984088
Pb 116pp AUD24.99

The blue digital collage by Jade Ritchie, which embraces the cover of *The Drop Off* by David Stavanger, evokes a sense of aloneness which might be felt when greeting an ex-partner, long after any warmth has grown cold. In this image, a child remains dutifully strapped in the car, while a lone parent becomes fish-bound, at risk of sliding beyond the precipice of the ordinary world and a cruel and lonely sea. Even before the book opens, this parent's one-dimensional body has become little more than a pictogram, transformed into the visual warning-language of street-safety. Gender and identity are erased, until the tender parent-child relationship – symbolised by the functionality of the carer at the school gate – is reduced to a generic human proxy. Such is the heart wrenching world Stavanger navigates in *The Drop Off*, while raising his child, Saul.

By the second line of this third collection, Stavanger's heartbreak has become encoded in the brutal industrialist language of "custody visits" (p. 11). This is co-parenting circa 2020 – something for the poet, and no doubt, many other parents too. Using the drop off as site for poetic enquiry, then, seems both as clever as it seems necessary. The clashing dynamics of *The Drop Off* set the tone for a child's foundational years, and dominate the social and financial reality of a single parent who just wants the best for their child.

Having willingly "sacrificed" his queen in a game of chess played against – or with – his son, Stavanger sifts over how these troubles began. It is from this rear-view mirror that the story world unfolds.

The difficulty of being the non-birthing parent, trying to act out the appropriate responses to the shock of birth is numbed by the "dilation of rooms and contraction of sheets" (p. 12). Where rites of passage may once have been celebrated, now there is only legal jargon. But of course, there is also Saul.

While divorce may end the marriage "transaction amicably" (p. 14), its threads are still dividing under the microscope. This is hard-wired into Saul's genetic code – this trio are, after all, forever linked at a "chromosomal" level, though Stavanger experiences this differently: "an atom can be split … like a home …" (p. 17).

Grief soon pushes into a powerful enjambment of birth and loss as storage boxes arrive:

> foraged for clues, trying to retrieve
> your arrival I emerge with connective tissue. (p. 13)

This eventually takes on an accusatory tone – "You were away a lot that year" (p. 13) – though Stavanger never reveals if the aim is himself, his ex, or possibly even Saul. It really doesn't matter, now that the un-pair have been told:

> to treat all custodial interactions
> as business transactions. To remove
> emotions but keep receipts, not that there
> is anything to return (nor return to). (p. 13)

At school, Saul's playground is flooded with bullies. Parent teacher nights are attended as Stavanger's heart is split open, while he tries to divine a world where his beautiful boy can feel loved and safe. As Saul grows, so does Stavanger's disillusionment at the way we live now, in an economic circumstance which has real-world consequences for single parents, artists, outsiders and almost anyone with a sensitive nature. This leaves Stavanger, like many others, battling to survive the current housing crisis, seeking answers to the question of how a man might simply afford a place to live.

The collection presents a fragmented collage of procedures, agreements, bad advice and frustrating schedules. Handovers are loaded with legal language as Stavanger experiments with forms, such as the "Child Support Calculator" which offers little blanks to tally up because "a child is made up of 50% care and 50% cost" (p. 66). Prose poems mingle their DNA with jokes and the language of bitcoin-thinking which mediates instability as a method of thinking.

Resentment, longing, and care coexist without resolution, though Stavanger's heart, always, is calling, always. A devotion to creative practice continues despite the exhaustion of struggles to make rent, while a neighbour might cash in on a property investment to resolve fiscal discomfort. This injustice leaves Stavanger considering a hatchback as a cheap housing alternative, one which might avoid the "negative gear" of those who control the finances of a neoliberal world.

Inevitably, "dot-point accountability" (p. 18) and "the economics of distance" (p. 26) land their final pencil-stabbing assault as Stavanger arrives to collect his son, only to endure the final insult, as his son is "hugging another man" (p. 26). This was never "part of the birth plan" (p. 26).

By high school, Saul is bullied beyond exhaustion. Stavanger invites him to take his power back, and in a triumphant fuck-the-patriarchy manoeuvre, the pair write "15 Ways To Be Erased" together. In doing so, Stavanger gives voice to the voiceless, the way a parent might share their oxygen mask with a child during a mid-flight crisis. Here, a solid tower of a man shows his willingness to break himself down and raise his son up, so that their presence in this shattered world appears as equals, sharing the same page.

It is no coincidence that it is this work which Nam Le and Jill Jones selected to include in *Best Poems of the Year, 2025*. Despite the poem's title, what is published can never truly be erased, even what is said – and now published – in childhood. Saul uses this opportunity to share tactics for avoiding the playground, which are familiar to anyone who has outrun the bullies (p. 78). It is this gesture, arising from Stavanger's skilful accumulating of the collateral damage of single-parentdom which makes *The Drop Off* stand out amid recent collections, and an excellent follow up to *Case Notes* (UWAP, 2020), which won the 2021 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry.

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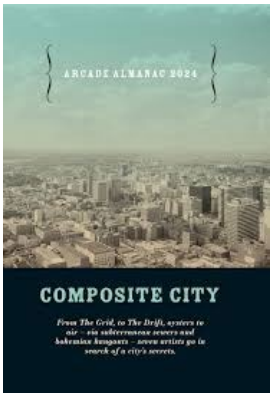
TEXT review

Composite City, Arcade Almanac 2024

review by Jocelyn Hargrave



Benjamin Sheppard, Victoria Kenworthy, Lisa French, Jessica L. Wilkinson, Beau Windon, Helen Addison-Smith and Rose Michael
Composite City, Arcade Almanac 2024
Arcade Publication, Melbourne VIC 2024
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Composite, to put the adjective's meaning simply, is something being created by combining distinct parts or elements – a synergistic coalescence of parts to form the whole. The title page's subheading summarises evocatively such a mélange in relation to the city in focus, Melbourne, Australia, and its myriad elements – historical, literal, conceptual, sensorial: "*From The Grid, to The Drift, oysters to air—via subterranean sewers and bohemian hangouts—seven artists go in search of a city's secrets*" (p. iii; author's own italics). These seven authors independently connect through their personal "site-specific storytelling" and academic research to reveal a nostalgic albeit pragmatic picture of their beloved city from its at-times contentious but no less iconoclastic nineteenth-century history to its problematic twenty-first-century future.

Composite City is the first publication to be released by micropublisher Arcade since its relaunch in 2024 after a twelve-year hiatus. The micropublisher was first established in 2007 by Rose Michael and Dale Campisi. Exemplifying its slogan "small books, big stories," Arcade produced short-run, black-and-white A6 editions of "minibiographies of unconventional characters from Melbourne's history" (Shaughnessy, Michael and Scott, 2019, p. 31). The objective of this first iteration, as related in Michael's artist statement in *Composite City*, was to "challenge contemporary commercial modes of publishing: we cut production and distribution costs, reduced editorial intervention, and focused on post-production marketing" (p. 1). Furthermore, in an interview with Caterson (2009), Michael described the cottage-style ecosystem that made possible Arcade's ethos and practice: "the whole enterprise [was] a very close-knit 'familial affair,' which [meant] that publishing decisions [could] be made quickly and that each person involved [had] a say in all aspects of the publishing process …" Arcade ceased operation in 2012 after five years and publishing twelve titles.

Michael's renewed purpose as Arcade's sole publisher is to "take pieces of the previous iteration" – producing cottage-style low-cost, black-and-white A6 editions – "to serve new intentions." These new intentions appear to exist within two distinct but interdependent contexts: "working *explicitly* with/in a university teaching and research context" (p. 1; author's own italics). The first is RMIT University in Melbourne, and specifically the student-led Bowen Street Press that "[turned the authors'] words into a book" (p. vii). Established in 2016, The Bowen Street Press is a compulsory subject that operates "within and out of RMIT's Master of Writing and Publishing" overseen by program manager and publisher Tracy O'Shaughnessy to provide students with experiential on-the-job learning (Shaughnessy, Michael and Scott, 2019, p. 32). The second context involves Arcade self-identifying as a Research Press, "position[ing] itself at the nexus of academic, industry and creative practices: making books—in answer to research questions—at the intersection of publics, publishing and academe" (p. 1). This positioning offers opportunities for interdisciplinary scholars to "share histories and practices, contribute new knowledges and old artefacts, to find other ways *in* to [their] beloved city." The purpose of these "writer-thinkers-makers" for this composite collection is to "'un-weave' and 'stitch-in' … everything" (p. 2).

In 'Subterranean City' (pp. 13–17) and 'The "Lucky" City' (pp. 57–86), Victoria Kenworthy focuses on the hidden, belowground matters of Melbourne to document aboveground realities of the late 1800s: notably, how Victorians "dealt with their bodily waste before the time of flushing toilets and underground sewers" (p. 3). At this time, not well at all – hence, the derisive moniker for the city became "Smellbourne," despite the city amassing "vast new wealth" from mining (p. 13). Recent underground excavations to make way for new railway tunnels and stations as part of "Big Build Project" to prepare Melbourne for its projected 2051 reality of a ten-million population have unearthed materials that provide insight into Victorians' nineteenth-century daily living but also connect with citizens' long-standing passion: not just "broken pottery, bottles and coins" (p. 14) but also coffee grounds – "Melburnians were already lining up for coffee in 1883" (p. 15). However, what became a modern city – with its "prime thoroughfares" (p. 60), eventual extensive water and sewerage systems made available to the public from 1857 and 1897 respectively, and the establishment of the University of Melbourne in 1853 and the

Working Men's College (now RMIT University) in 1887 (both skilling the city's workers) – was problematically created from colonial industrialised progress; a preservation wrought from destruction: "The 'instant' wealth – for European settlers anyway – was paid for by the destruction of the lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations" (p. 58). Kenworthy returns later in *Composite City* with "Tetraclitella Judiciae" (pp. 127–132). The discovery in 2006 of a Miocene acorn barnacle attached to the outside wall of Building 20 of RMIT University (where Kenworthy works), formerly Victoria's Supreme Court on the corner of La Trobe and Russell streets, becomes the staging ground to reflect on both Melbourne's architectural history and the city's under- and aboveground "connections and networks" (p. 4), of potential destruction and preservation, using the fossil uncovered in plain sight as material evidence and metaphor.

Lisa French, in "The Swanston Family" (pp. 19–45), effectively draws from public and private archives, where "research and memory encountered and informed one another" (p. 5), to craft a vibrant picture of a bohemian Melbourne in the 1950s. Contributing to, and making possible in no small part, such bohemia was the Swanston Family Hotel, "a hub for intellectuals and artists and home to several feminist publicans" (p. 5), including French's father Leonard (Len), "an aspiring artist," who frequently visited and to a lesser extent their mother Helen, "a fledgling fashion designer" (p. 20). French's picture of bohemian Melbourne, of culture and community, though, also extends beyond the Swanston Family Hotel's operating hours: the "drinking and carousing" (p. 28) persisted into the darker hours, notably in Eltham, in Melbourne's north, from which seeded tensions between two subcultures, across the north–south state divide: The Drift in Melbourne and The Push in Sydney, of which Germaine Greer and Frank Moorhouse were well-known representatives. A second culture that French paints beyond, but still connected to, the Swanston Family Hotel and French's parents was Melbourne "new café society" (p. 35), such as Mirka and Georges Mora's Mirka Cafe and Ion Nicolades' The Legend Cafe, which link to and provide historical continuity with Kenworthy's 'Subterranean City' and 'The "Lucky" City', as well as Jessica L. Wilkinson's free-verse poem 'White Rabbit Enters the Eastbourne Cafe and Exits the Balzac, 1955-57' (pp. 44–53; see below). It is French's movement from public to private, research and memory, that afforded an enriched connection – and that of their readers, by extension – "between family and city histories" (p. 5).

Helen Addison-Smith's "Oyster State" (pp. 101–125), recounts unapologetically the commercial, sociocultural and environmental histories, impacts (mostly harmful) and connections of/between Melbourne and its oyster industry from the mid-1850s to present day. Case studies, with grey background (all breakout text in the publication are similarly designed to distinguish from body text), are provided on the "impact of human behaviour and the changing environment on oysters" (pp. 103–104); the Flinders Oyster Company (pp. 106–108), whose "complicated and beautiful set-up … exists so that oysters are protected from what now passes for nature" (p. 108); the indigenous oyster, *Ostea angasi* (pp. 109–111); and the frenetic, ever-evolving (often out of business) oyster saloons of the "Oyster City" (pp. 111–115). As Addison-Smith acknowledges in their artist statement, their own journey through the crafting of this piece "took me to a much darker place than I thought it would", that "the history of food" is the history of colonialist ecocide (p. 8) – ironically, four recipes are supplied at the end, including one interestingly entitled

"Swanston Family Pie" (p. 122). This is an ecocide to which most of Melbourne's citizens, past and present in the perceived post-colonial landscape, from farmers to chefs to consumers, have contributed to.

Composite City appears to be structured according to the rule of thirds (Samara [2020, p. 58] defines this design guideline as a "simplified mathematical approach [that] divides any format into thirds"), where the first two thirds are separated by means of two poems. The first poem, 'White Rabbit Enters the Eastbourne Cafe and Exits the Balzac, 1955-57' by Jessica L. Wilkinson (pp. 44–53), is placed one-third into the publication, between Benjamin Sheppard's outline of his exhibition *Scribble Me This* (pp. 9–12; "hand-drawn images [that result from Sheppard's] visit to the Flinders Oyster Company on Phillip Island" [p. 148]), from which select full-page artwork is peppered throughout *Composite City* to visually support but also separate specific sections, and a map of Melbourne (p. 54). And the second, 'Carry Through' by Beau Windon (pp. 88–100), appears two-thirds into the publication between Kenworth's 'The "Lucky' City"' and Addison-Smith's 'Oyster State'. The peppering of Sheppard's artwork is beautifully inspired, the mindset behind which is communicated in Sheppard's artist statement: "Realistically, the overlapping stories and images of major cultural centres are complex palimpsest of competing and parallel stories" (p. 2).

The premise of the free verse 'White Rabbit Enters the Eastbourne Cafe and Exits the Balzac, 1955–57', according to Wilkinson's artist statement, emerged from "a desire to write about the bohemian art world that circulated the Balzac Restaurant, established by Georges and Mirka Mora in the mid-1950s in East Melbourne" (p. 5); and the poem starts in an almost disjointed but understandable way with the inter/paratextual inclusion of the Balzac's handwritten menu as a double-page spread (pp. 44–45) – disjointed because, first, the menu appears before the poem's title (p. 46) without additional signposting to anchor it, and, second, it ostensibly presents little relevance to the poem, besides specific but ad-hoc mention of menu items, such as "and all wonder, an artist serving | sausages and banana fritters on the upside" (p. 46). However, consistent with the multifaceted nature of *Composite City*, closer inspection reveals the opposite (with necessary reference to Wilkinson's artist statement [pp. 5–6] and author's sources [pp. 141–142]). "White Rabbit" in the poem's title refers, again intertextually, to Australian artist Charles Blackman's *Alice in Wonderland* collection, "a set of forty-six tempura and oil paintings made between 1956 and 1957", when he was employed at the Balzac as a short-order cook (p. 5). The poem is divided into three parts, each combining to offer an account of Blackman's artistic process and endeavours crafting *Alice* alongside his day job – in this way, Wilkinson's identification of their work as "poem *as event*" becomes poignant: "requiring a reader's engagement and interpretation—[giving] rise to this dish we imbibe and embody" (p. 6; author's own italics). Wilkinson invites their readers to delight vicariously in Blackman's "madness" (p. 47), "to let go of time and space and commonsense as we discern a rabbit rising" (p. 6).

Windon's free concrete poem 'Carry Through' (pp. 88–100), utilises, as explained in the artists' sources, "craft methods developed through [their] PhD research and creative practice"; both drew insight from mythogeography and the scholarship of Paul Smith (p. 137). Smith (2010, p. 120) describes *mythogeography* as the following: "Instead of a spatially defined, ordered utopia,

mythogeography proceeds by trajectory rather than architecture and art or anti-art and anti-architecture." Windon then proceeded to "further [develop] these approaches into their own methods, informed by personal experiences yarning with mob in First Nation spaces" – that is, Naarm (p. 138). Such trajectory is evident in Windon's at times neologistic, seemingly anarchic poetry, deployed for their artist statement (pp. 7–8) and particularly for 'Carry Through'. For the first, Windon articulates their approach as creative researcher/practitioner and their relationship with Country; for the second, Windon reviewed authorial contributions in *Composite City* to derive prompts "for how best to explore what needed to be explored" (p. 138) – in this instance, personifying Naarm, its resilience and dignity, in response to imperialism's destructive labours to fashion and impose a dystopian existence on the First Nation peoples, the landscape and its inhabitants.

Composite City is a multifaceted, polyvocal delight emerging from an equally refreshed Arcade Publications; the task of encapsulating both, a much-appreciated challenge and pleasure. It was personally poignant for me as an Australian presently living in the United Kingdom: while originally from Sydney, I adopted wholeheartedly Melbourne, its history and literature, in my late twenties before relocating to take up my lectureship at University of Derby in my late forties. I was, and remain, devoted to this beloved city; however, *Composite City* reminds us, especially at this uncertain moment, of the power of collective memory, transparency and learning from the past to effect a humane, sustainable future. As Sheppard writes, "While there is no definitive 'City,' we do commune across it in multitudinous ways. Some of which get forgotten. Many are purposely overlooked" (p. 2).

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