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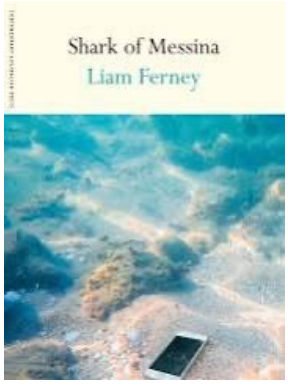
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TEXT review

Just when you thought it was safe to go back to the poetry section

review by G. S. Dickson



Liam Ferney
Shark of Messina
Hunter Contemporary Australian Poets, Santa Lucia [sic] 2026
ISBN 9781763509283
Pb 86pp AUD24.95

Liam Ferney's *Shark of Messina* is a semantic feeding-frenzy, gorging itself on whatever comes its way. Be it the detritus of internet memes, viral news clips and pop culture, or choicer morsels of philosophy and theology, the shark will devour anything. The effect of Ferney's linguistic bricolage, where the argots of various social media jostle alongside B-movie dialogue and rap cliches, must vary greatly according to the reader's level of online literacy, although even within that sphere, the breadth of the references deployed seems calibrated to ensure that even the most terminally online of individuals (as Ferney describes himself) will be left grasping for sense at some point. That suspension of meaning is certainly at least part of the

point of the semantic encounters Ferney structures. The defamiliarization of language and its deformation to confound and delight are, of course, cornerstones of Modernist poetics, but here they are applied to language already deformed, compressed, coded, a kind of cant, and it remains for Ferney to organise it in strange and striking ways, according to his mood or mercurial wit: "ask yourself if bots dream of eclectic tweets", he proffers at the end of "basic af", one of the more perplexing poems in the collection. The relationship of these poems to those of the heroic age of Modernism is indeed one of the themes of this book. The opening poem, 'The Roaring Twenties' collapses and contrasts our own twenties with the previous century's, and adds Wodehousian aristocratic banter to the extensive list of linguistic registers Ferney marshals, while a few pages later, 'Red Weal' offers a grimly hilarious parody of Williams; 'A True Account…' is a meta-"Frank O riff", and 'Guard Duty 2091' bears touches of Yeatsian apocalypticism.

Ferney is acutely self-aware of the awkwardness of his historical position: his poems are "stitched from the threads of a millennium / ended and the new one just begun", as he explains in 'Chapeau'. He sees his place within a tradition existing as part of the evolution of language, that shaped it to a degree, but also that, with the pace of meaning in the contemporary moment supercharged by our global intercommunication, that the place in question is clinging to the roof of a runaway train. Thus, 'Bodybuilding.com', which renders the Matter of Britain in the manner of the manosphere, or taking inspiration from clickbait headlines ("Daycare busted for running a fight club on Snapchat"). Ferney's attitude towards the pop culture that saturates his verse is always ironically distanced, his pose frequently a sort of down-and-out figure, perpetually on the fringes, more comfortable outside looking sceptically in than finding himself the "dope / bringing up Derrida at the pub". With amused detachment or, at most, muted outrage, he subjects the inescapable, relentless information stream to the formal constraints of poetry, from quatrains to calligrammes, often inflected with jazz rhythms and hip-hop rhymes: "some hot nights with beefcakes / scrolling hyperlinks and hot fakes", begins 'Fitspo'. Some of the most sublime moments, however, come from the more (as it were) offline poems in the collection, such as 'Miss Ohio', a love poem as allusive and elusive as anything else in the book, yet with the mask of cynicism through which Ferney usually speaks momentarily dropped.

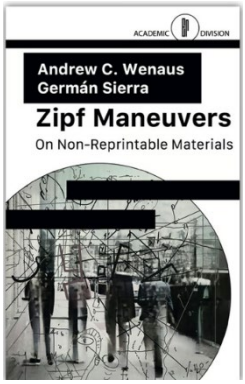
G.S. Dickson is a fiction writer, poet, translator and creative-writing teacher. His debut novel A Minor Fifth *(Hunter Publishers, 2024) was shortlisted for the* Australian*/Vogel Literary Award. His fiction has appeared in* The White Review*,* Coastlines *Journal and* STORGY*; his story 'Popular Mechanics' was shortlisted for* The White Review *Short Story Prize and anthologised in* The Best Australian Science Writing*. He holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland and has taught creative writing at the University of Oxford and UQ.*

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TEXT review

Invasion of the copyright snatchers

review by Thomas Moran



Andrew C. Wenaus and Germán Sierra
Zipf Maneuvers: On Non Reprintable Materials
Erratum Press, Sheffield UK 2025
ISBN 9781916541108
Pb 272pp AUD26.99

Zipf Maneuvers: On Non Reprintable Materials is an experiment in pushing the limits of both copyright law and language itself. Written – or rather engineered – by Andrew C. Wenaus and Germán Sierra, *Zipf* is an act of protest against corporate publishing and its control over the intellectual property of authors. The authors adopt an ingenious strategy of linguistic reappropriation and statistical redistribution, working at the intersection of language and code. They are writers who continue in the tradition of Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, merging linguistic disorientation with a sci-fi sensibility and a predilection for exploring the way computation revolutionises writing.

Zipf Maneuvers has its origins in a thwarted attempt by the authors to republish their own work. Wenaus and Sierra sought permission from academic publishing titans Springer/Nature and Bloomsbury to reprint essays they had written on Japanese avant-gardist Kenji Siratori for the re-release of his book *Blood Electric* (2002), a novel which Sierra describes as "A *Finnegans Wake* for the postdigital millennium". However, the publishers demanded an exorbitant fee to reproduce Wenaus and Sierra's original essays, far in excess of any profits the two would receive from their republication and far in excess of anything Calamari Press, the small publishing house re-releasing Siratori's book, could afford. In response, Wenaus and Sierra devised a cunning scheme to release their essays in the form of an encoded literary object.

Zipf Maneuvers takes its name from a discovery made by George Kingsley Zipf (1902–1950), an American linguist, who used statistics to study the frequency of word use in natural languages. He discovered what came to be known as Zipf's law, which states that if one lists all the words in a given sample in order of how often they are used, their frequency tends to be inversely proportional to their "rank" (p. 77). In other words, the most common word occurs approximately twice as often as the next most common, and three times as often as the third most common. Zipf's law has been observed in everything from the Torah to the New Testament and is a reminder of the deep mathematical structures governing language use. It is precisely the kind of discovery that writers like Wenaus and Sierra would relish, committed as they are to a form of literature which jettisons the human agent to instead explore the creativity of anonymous systems.

Zipf's law governs the compositional logic of the text. Wenaus and Sierra wrote an algorithm which analysed their original essays, recorded the frequency of individual words, noted their position in the text and then organised them by rank. The code used to perform this operation is included as a "Proem" which opens the book and so, theoretically, the original essays can be reconstituted using this programme. However, the text never actually violates copyright law. In fact, it follows the letter of the law so closely that it exposes the absurd consequences of the legal injunction against republication.

The main body of the book is made up of columns of numbers, with each word ranked by frequency and followed by a long list of digits designating where they appear in the original essays. Predictably, function words occur most frequently. In the first set "the" occurs 308 times, "of" appears 271 times and "and" is found 197 times. The first noun to appear is "media" (appearing 33 times) followed by "art" (28) and "human" (26). The list of words which only appear once includes everything from "autopoiesis" to "superintelligence", "accelerationism" to "glissandi". Proper names remain uncapitalised throughout and benjamin, stein and beckett, all appear as anonymised data within the set. One does not so much read this text as scan it; eyes move up and down columns of figures, picking out a recognisable linguistic signal amidst the noise of number.

There is a fundamental ambivalence to the text's statistical structure. One can read this interminable ranking of signifiers as an extension of the logic of copyright itself, which reduces texts to commodities whose value resides only in their capacity to generate profit. In this light

Zipf Maneuvers appears to be a mimetic exacerbation of the commodity form, bringing it to bear on the signifier itself, which in this text has no meaning outside of its frequency. Words are made to obey what Marx described as the logic of equivalence wherein the value form converts diverse materials into objects of exchange. While Marx wrote of silk, shirts and labour time, *Zipf* is concerned with work of the intellect and the raw material of language, as these, too, become flotsam tossed about on the tides of trade.

However, if we read the book in the tradition of avant-garde literature, this numerical reductionism is in fact an act of syntactical liberation. *Zipf* frees the words of the original essays from their subservience to grammar, structure and meaning. As Nietzsche once said, "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (p. 483). We might read this text then as a salvo fired against the Godhead as grammarian and copyright holder. In *Zipf* words shine forth as free-floating non-sense organised by the impersonal compositional power of statistics, that great unacknowledged author who anonymously organises all our speech and scribbling. Statistical distribution demands no profits for its work, asks for no recognition for its labour and is thus the ultimate anti-author, repudiating Romanticism in a manner more absolute than Pound, Stein or even Mac Low could have imagined.

It is worth remembering that one of the greatest of the Romantics, William Wordsworth, worked tirelessly in his later life to extend copyright privileges to authors beyond their death. This was in line with his philosophy, outlined as early as the *Lyrical Ballads*, that great poetry took time to be appreciated, and thus poetic copyright should go to the author's descendants. In an 1819 letter to J. Forbes Mitchell he asked, "why the laws should interfere to take away those pecuniary emoluments which are the natural Inheritance of the posterity of Authors" (p. 110). Along with Carlyle and Southey, Wordsworth submitted petitions to the British parliament which eventually resulted in the Copyright Act of 1842, extending copyright to the term of an author's lifetime plus seven years or forty-two years after publication, whichever was longer (p. 111).

However, what Wordsworth did not consider, was the way in which copyright law had not been initially established for the benefits of authors at all, but rather as a way of curbing the power of printers, or what were at the time termed booksellers. The first British copyright law, The Statute of Anne of 1710, was designed to prevent booksellers claiming perpetual publication rights over the works of canonical authors like Shakespeare or Milton. The history of intellectual property has thus been a continual struggle between authors seeking renumeration for their labour and publishers seeking to generate surplus value from their power to print.

Copyright as a site of struggle has only intensified in the digital age. Over the last thirty years corporate publishers travelled the world buying the rights to thousands of journals, books and newspapers, leasing out our intellectual heritage to institutions for outrageous fees. It is fitting that a work like *Zipf* which ridicules this miserly practice should be dedicated to Aaron Schwartz, the young programmer and Creative Commons activist who illegally downloaded thousands of articles from MIT and uploaded them online in an act of protest. In a time of untrammelled greed destroying our common intellect, *Zipf* is a sly and subversive work, a

Duchampian middle finger to the avaricious fiends trashing our culture for the sake of what Blake called “The Throne of Mammon Grey”.

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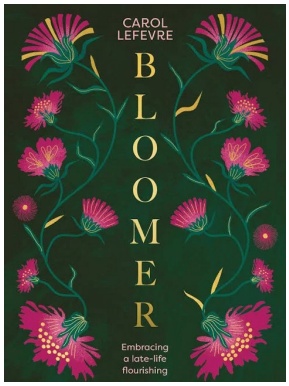
Thomas Moran is a writer and researcher interested in the legacy of the antipodean avant-garde.

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TEXT review

Flourishing through the seasons

review by Andrew Leggett



Carol Lefevre
Bloomers: Embracing a Late-Life Flourishing
Affirm Press, South Melbourne VIC 2025
ISBN 9781923293038
Pb 270pp AUD34.99

Carole Lefevre's memoir *Bloomer* is enhanced by Margaret Ambridge's cover art and her charcoal and Indian ink illustrations. This celebration of ageing begins in a garden, moves through the seasons from Summer through to Spring, and ends with transcripts of a series of interviews with older people in optimistic conversation.

As the author approaches her seventieth birthday, she contemplates the garden both as "paradise worth cultivating" and one from which a taste of "the fruit from the tree of knowledge" (p. 1) guarantees expulsion into conscious awareness of ageing and ultimate mortality. LeFevre's garden functions as an ambivalent, even polyvalent, trope. Entrance into

the enclosed space of this garden of flourishing enables defence against degenerative processes, avoidance of despair.

Seventy is presented as "a significant border, and if it can be crossed, it must be crossed. Once on the other side, I will be old, no question" (p. 13). With this declaration, LeFevre launches an account of events that, even in the summer of youth, remind us that we are mortal, and of how we go about blinding ourselves to signifiers of mortality. She presents ageing as a process by which, more for women than for men, we enter a realm of invisibility. Such invisibility protects the young from apprehension of the reality of ageing, and terror at encountering "the Old Woman, the Hag, the Crone" (p. 7). Such ageism is considered something from which even young doctors might not be immune, in their tendency to overlook the effects of ageing, especially on older women. Lefevre quips, "Older women need a mature doctor and a young hairdresser" (p. 24).

A theme of Lefevre's book is the cultural and psychological disadvantage experienced by women regarding their ageing, as she compares it to that of men. "Is it possible," she asks, "that women experience grief around ageing earlier, and more emphatically, than men ...?" (p. 45). The narrative ventures into this question, weaves its way across most other aspects of ageing, gendered or otherwise, then wends its way back to it, sometimes seeming less a question to be considered but more a complaint to be addressed. The author's plaint, against this gendered ageing, is one from which the garden provides a welcome retreat. As she suggests, "perhaps a garden belongs to this age of womanhood when the self becomes slightly invisible even to the self" (p. 51).

"Beyond sixty," LeFevre says, "women fade not only from fiction and the male gaze, but from every gaze" (p. 56). She raises concern regarding such invisibility adversely affecting care given by health care professionals. The health system may be afflicted with blindness and indifference to ailments and injuries suffered by the aged, especially by older women, that would not go unnoticed and untended if they were presented by younger patients. LeFevre's retort to this experience of recession into invisibility is that "whether or not we are seen, we have the power of womanhood. And if when you look at us you don't see us, it is not our fault, but yours" (p. 60).

The garden metaphor progresses into Autumn, with the falling of the withered leaves of the plane trees under which the author passes. LeFevre likens the wind pushing the leaves along to the process of death cleaning. The narrative segues to intrusion of cancer into the generative processes of life, as exemplified by surgery forcing cancellation of the author's book launch. While awaiting the pathologist's report on the tissues surrounding her tumour, LeFevre writes of "locking the gate and leaving the garden for the last time," imagining its subsequent decent into chaos, waste and ruin (p. 76). Ambivalently interspersed with justified complaints of a gender differential in ageism, one that LeFevre terms "sex-ageism" (p. 94), the possibility of old age as a time of "*kairos*: the possibility of radiance" is introduced (p.101). LeFevre argues that "by continuing to denigrate old age", especially the ageing of women, "we are contributing to this ordeal" implicit in the degenerative processes of ageing (p. 101).

The text continues into Winter, beginning with consideration of voluntary assisted dying, progressing to discourse on partings with precious others, the death of memory and its passing into timelessness, sexuality in aged care facilities, the loneliness of ageing and a concept that LeFevre terms 'antifragility … a state beyond resilience, in which a thing improves or becomes stronger when harmed.' (p. 159). She considers the tragedy of homelessness, increasingly experienced by Australian women from middle age onwards. Through that she segues back to the garden trope 'by acknowledging that I am privileged to have a garden, and that it is a luxury not available to everyone" (p. 171). The possibility is raised that "if, or when, a physical garden becomes permanently out of reach, there will always be the possibility of the imagined garden" (p. 172).

The author brings the reader to Spring, beginning with a review of various authors' works on imaginary gardens. LeFevre raises the question of "whether a positive habit, such as imagining a garden, could rewire one's brain in a good way" (p. 182). The possibilities provided by a practice of imaging a garden could enable "any of us" to "wander among crumbling masonry and vivid wildflowers, or drift towards sleep on the barn owl's silent swoop across a pale summer sky" (p. 183).

LeFevre brings us glimpses of the younger woman that she was, construed as "only one of many selves," whom she construes to be "Russian dolls nested in memory" (p. 187). Then we are taken to "the spring before last" when the author woke alarmed by the onset of irregularities of her pulse, occurring at a time when "Rose bushes were forming buds" and she feared "my heart might fail at any moment" (p. 187). Memories and reflections on freshness and new life are juxtaposed with anxiety-laden musings on mortality and "a lingering nostalgia for" a "younger self" (p. 192) who might experience "an urgent need for a rose" (p194).

The chapters are interspersed with extracts from the author's garden journal. Transitioning from "Russian Dolls and Roses" (pp. 185-194) to "The Ordinary and Extraordinary" (pp. 196-203), LeFevre describes experiences in the garden leaving her "inclined to feel immortal. It's to do with the garden's sense of timelessness, knowing that other gardeners down the centuries have experienced this same feeling of being held suspended in the sweet soft breath of early spring" (p. 195). These cameos add fragrance to this hybrid work, with the journal entries functioning as prose poetry interspersed between the essays.

At the end of the chapter in which LeFevre describes her invocation of John Lennon's music to counter the alienation she experienced inside the MRI machine scanning her brain for cancer, she writes of art serving to shine in a way that removes darkness. This author's manifesto is to espouse a blooming into radiance in the experience of ageing. Before launching into the interview transcripts that make up the appendices to this work, she concludes the last essay with a pronouncement: "My body may be old, but the self inside is ageless. I say to myself: Okay, Bloomer, the Golden Age is now. Now is the time to flower" (p. 234).

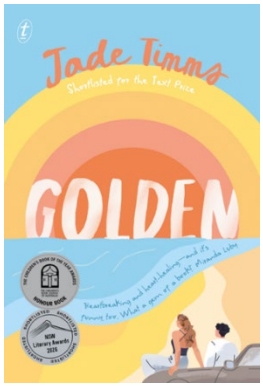
Andrew Leggett is a Queensland-based author and editor of fiction, poetry, interdisciplinary academic papers, reviews and songs. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, Andrew holds a research master's degree in Creative Writing from the University 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

Growing pains: A contemporary Australian classic

review by Emily Davis



Jade Timms
Golden
Text Publishing, Melbourne VIC 2025
ISBN 9781923058354
Pb 304pp AUD22.99

Golden possesses the hallmarks of an Australian coming-of-age classic, sitting comfortably alongside works like *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992) and *Puberty Blues* (1979). In her breakout novel, Timms deftly unpacks an Australian girlhood in coastal New South Wales: the struggle to fit in, searching for higher purpose, the flush of first love. But *Golden* has its own distinctive turf, with its exploration of trauma and PTSD offering something deeper beneath the familiar landscape of Australian adolescence.

Golden is narrated by Eddie, a withdrawn teen grappling with complex peer and familial relationships while processing the death of someone close to her.

While her twin brother Pat and his mates are surfing and smoking dope in treehouses, Eddie self-ostracises in the attempt to evade her past. The arrival of Howl O'Donnell, the new boy in town, becomes a catalyst for Eddie to reach out to others and begin to heal. Eddie decides to train for the annual Mud Run, a gruelling race that requires exceptional physical fitness. The race training overlaps with Eddie's emotional journey, demonstrating the ongoing nature of grieving. Sea-glass, introduced in opening paragraphs, becomes representative of not only Eddie and Howl's connection, but the creation of something precious from something damaged.

Amidst the landscape of homework, backseat pashing and house parties is a quiet analysis of psychological fallout after a personal catastrophe. Through Eddie's voice, —"*The forest of dread in my stomach grows a little thicker*"— Timms captures the suffocating nature of unresolved grief. We see with agonising clarity the consequences of someone retreating increasingly inward. Simultaneously, *Golden* seems to suggest grief and death, rather than being finite and bleak, can open opportunities for connection and personal growth – a pathway rather than a dead end.

Mercifully, Timms dodges the princess trope. Howl is present, but largely static; he neither propels Eddie towards enlightenment nor hinders her from it. Like the rest of her peers, he becomes a quiet reflection of her choices.

Timms writes with clarity and sensitivity, anchoring the reader in the present. We experience the immediacy, the headrush of a sun-bleached adolescence, as she effortlessly combines authentic-sounding dialogue with visceral prose. The story moves at a more deliberate pace than a typical teen read, which makes it all the more savorable. The event behind Eddie's grief is a mystery for the first half of the book, keeping the reader in suspense until the revelation.

The novel presents a refreshing style of teen romance. While love scenes are candid, they are not overly graphic. As Eddie and Howl rub sunscreen into each other's backs, the reader experiences the palpable rush of a first crush – sweat, trembling hands. Eddie notes "*his lower spine is covered in a fine coating of hairs.*" (Chap. 10, para. 12) The novel's approach to sexuality is equally unforced. Timms gives her young characters room to inhabit their sexual identities without becoming subjects for moral commentary. They simply are.

Golden showcases a variety of food descriptions: vegan scones, sourdough with butter secreted at the back of the fridge, the smoothies Eddie makes at home and for her friends. While the food writing was enjoyable to read, at times it felt like a cosmetic addition to the plot. The novel's portrayal of Eddie's household – its vegan meals, alternative values and absent mother – contributes to its distinctive atmosphere. Occasionally, however, these elements feel idealised, existing perhaps more to establish a particular cultural milieu than to reflect the messier contradictions of family life.

Golden is warm, funny and quietly painful, with enough spirit to keep its more sombre material from becoming overwhelming. Its greatest achievement is that it never asks Eddie to stop

grieving in order to be happy. Instead, it allows the two things to exist together. *Golden* is not a lesson in overcoming loss. Rather, it gives young readers permission to believe that life can still be golden around it.

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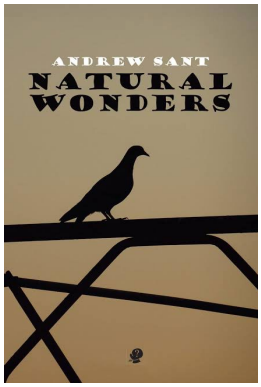
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TEXT review

‘The shape of attention’ (different from the title of the book reviewed)

review by Michelle Borzi



Andrew Sant
Natural Wonders
Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah NSW 2025
ISBN 9781923099677
Pb 110pp AUD27.00

Natural Wonders is a quintessential late Andrew Sant book: intellectually curious, humane, and quietly wry. These poems explore, infer, and wonder their way through subjects as varied as the natural world, travel, memory, and mortality, often discovering significance in what might otherwise pass unnoticed. Across sixteen poetry collections, including two selecteds, Sant has returned repeatedly to sustained acts of observation, and to how attention enlarges the world it encounters.

‘This Loggerhead Turtle’ is among a suite of poems that exemplify how observation gathers into reflection. It begins with a turtle’s ascent of the beach:

> How heavy she must feel
> now that, out of the sea,
> she's huge in the moonlight,
> one of the planet's
> great navigators, her flippers,
> efficient in the deep, now
> forcing her dark turtle bulk
> up the beach, her heart
> beating faster. The effort,
> and her ancient reptilian head,
> so like a fossil of itself,
> wise-looking from its lone
> submarine journeying,
> solicit human tenderness. (p. 10)

Here, and through the poem, cumulative syntactical lines thread across multiple enjambments, mirroring the loggerhead's slow movement, until accumulation seems to mimic the workings of attention itself. That momentum carries thought forward with ease, continually shadowing the speaker's act of looking. Sant attends closely to species and behaviour, but also to how such attentiveness shapes perception. "Solicit human tenderness" marks a subtle shift: tenderness is invited, perhaps even projected by the observer. The turtle remains in focus, yet attention ranges beyond her to the ecological rhythms that sustain her species:

> You, watching via binoculars,
> see the genesis of risk,
> the probability a single
> hatchling at most will live
> to tune into the appeal
> of the earth's magnetic field,
> and thereby return here,
> the dome of its carapace
> slowly emerging from the sea
> lapping this beach some year. (p. 10)

The poem moves from what can be seen to what can only be anticipated, the syntax carrying that transition almost imperceptibly.

Through *Natural Wonders*, movement of thought seems to gather itself as it goes. 'Relative Bearings' is ostensibly about location, maps, and knowing where one is. Set during a journey through the Danube delta, the poem repeatedly adjusts its focus between particulars (frogs, waterlilies, swans, ducks) and the larger immensities of the delta, neither perspective fully settling before the other comes into view. Attention also falls on different forms of orientation: a fellow passenger repeatedly turns his map "this way and that" while pelicans, "flying in

formation overhead" (p. 8), seem surer of their bearings than the passengers below. The poem's closing lines tacitly side with what exceeds both map and vista:

> The map the man's finger visits must show
> a maze of channels, steamlets and lakes
> for, evidently, it matters to him
> where on his map of the Danube delta
> we are by the minute
> given how, within it, only a little
> of the delta can be glimpsed –
> about which the tall, resolute reeds
> the boar skirmishes with merely hint. (p. 9)

These lines carry an unhurried rhythm: read aloud, they gather slowly, repeatedly pressing thought back into the physical world. Phrases such as "must show", "evidently", and "given how" gently extend and qualify the speaker's reflection as he quietly registers the disparity between the man's search for exact bearings and the partial view the landscape allows. Through the poem, every attempt at mastering the delta is brought back to a landscape that reveals itself only in glimpses. The poem's title distils this insight with a typically understated wit.

Observation becomes more intimate in 'Medical Developments', a ten-poem sequence, where attention is turned upon illness and on uncertainties that are lived as well as observed. 'The Numbers' turns to diagnosis, its first stanza introducing the statistical logic of risk:

> Probability usefully suggests
> it won't, of course, happen
> to you but, as surely, to others. (p. 50)

The voice remains lightly ironic and matter-of-fact, drawing on the language of likelihood and prognosis before clinical reasoning narrows to the speaker's own diagnosis:

> the maths done – random first one:
> a delinquent cell that now rouses
> treatment, a budding killer,
>
> a fucking tough little number. (p. 50)

'The Numbers' achieves a remarkable economy; every phrase and cadence pulls weight. 'Probability' acquires a striking emotional heft in retrospect: initially an impersonal measure of risk, it is recast as a stubborn adversary.

Elsewhere in the 'Medical Development' sequence, poems such as 'In the Hospital Clinic Waiting Room', 'Blood', and 'Neighbours' develop through exploratory narrative. The

opening of ‘In the Hospital Clinic Waiting Room’ widens from the speaker’s perspective to a shared experience of illness:

> Having taken my place
> as a seasoned patient
> at the umpteenth appointment
> in numerous bare, functional
> medical rooms, I surveyed,
> in the way a CAT scan cannot,
> the individual demeanours –
> the resigned outnumbering the resolute –
> of those on the blue, institutional seats,
> I now sat with, some probably
> also survivors of a recent
> surgical intervention masked only
> by their dignified composures,
> no-one any longer compelled
> to wear a white-gown
> on this shared occasion
> of generalised tedium, a tribute
> to the wish to move off soon
> into the world of the well. (p. 49)

Here, lineation and the single unfolding sentence enact accumulation as the speaker reads bodies, behaviours, and small signs of endurance, layering observation and reflection in a movement more commonly associated with prose. Prepositions and articles (as, at, in, the, to, on, of) gather through the passage. Repeatedly placed at the beginnings of lines, they become hinges that propel sentence, narrative, and line cadence onward, elaborating the routine and endurance of medical treatment while postponing closure. Just as notably, each time thought reaches temporary stability, the speaker re-opens the syntax through phrases such as “some probably”, “also survivors”, “masked only”, and “no-one any longer”. The cumulative effect carries attention towards “a solitary earthenware pot” holding “two small shoots, weeds / mysteriously thriving” (p. 49-50), a quiet image of ordinary continuance.

Several longer poems across the collection pursue this exploratory mode at greater length, often bringing them close to the discursive quality of the personal essay. In ‘The Yangtze’, a remembered journey along China’s longest river initiates a three-page meditation on ecological loss, pollution, and state-led modernisation and power. Its expository prose syntax slides into movements of self-interruption:

> I set out from an old wharf
> in restive Chongqing, a hazard
> to locate the modest boat, time

running out. Time, doubtless
won't allow a repeat
journey, should I desire it,
time at a premium
or squandered and, knowing this,
now, I recall, where we'd
moored on the riverbank,
being in the streets
before the river rose
and drowned Fengdu. (p. 74)

'The Yangtze' develops connected reflections: memory opens onto travel narrative, documentary witness, and ethical inquiry. The narrative keeps moving, though not in a straight line. Instead, memories and commentary repeatedly fold back into one another, producing a recursive movement akin to the syntax of memoir. Temporal markers reinforce this pattern: "Never to return", "many years since", "knowing this", and "now, I recall" continually reposition the voice in reminiscence and in the act of narrating. At the same time, phrases such as "Time, doubtless / won't allow a repeat / journey" and "should I desire it" extend the meditation to include ageing and mortality.

Even at its most contemplative, Andrew Sant's *Natural Wonders* remains grounded in acts of attention guided by an exploratory way of knowing. At times, this poetry's commitment to following observation where it leads can also loosen poetic concentration and some poems feel more diffusely exploratory, with reflection occasionally exceeding the attentive shaping of the collection's strongest poems. But the pleasure of this book at its best lies in accompanying a mind that hardly separates observation from reflection, returning with curiosity and humility to what has been seen, remembered, and encountered.

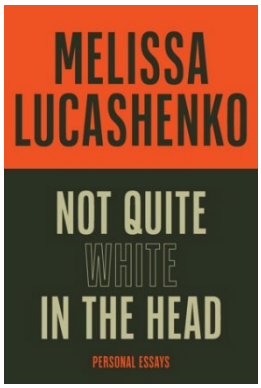
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TEXT review

On properly healed femurs: Lucashenko's tales of Blak resilience in the hollow place

review by Fiadh Storm



Melissa Lucashenko
Not Quite White in the Head: Personal Essays
University of Queensland Press, St Lucia QLD 2025
ISBN 978070227114 4
Hb 248pp AUD37.99

Not Quite White in the Head, a collection of personal essays from Goorie author Melissa Lucashenko, explores Aboriginality, the craft of storytelling, and a future in which the nation's collective consciousness advances towards Indigenous sovereignty and respect (p. 78). At the heart of each work is a close examination of the contemporary Blak experience in colonised Australia: the essays' subjects, Lukashenko's own, and those of the fictional characters in her novels.

The collection's non-linear structure guides the reader on a complex journey, artfully woven from a variety of literary media, including keynote addresses, interviews, Lucashenko's extensive sociological research and interpersonal experiences, alongside traditional personal

essays. The result is a masterpiece of Aboriginal non-fiction, as much about every Australian as it is about the author, reminding us that, as per "traditional Blak cosmology, everything in existence has somewhere to belong and a way to be" (p. 231).

Lucashenko gifts the reader with humour and hope throughout - as cups of tea are made and the ocean lamented during an active shooter lockdown in *A Lismore Story,* I understand the comfort of a boiling kettle; when local mob dub police helicopters the "Birds of Logan" (p. 13), I remember my time in South-east Queensland and smile. I've heard that before. Vitally, though, *Not Quite White* is about being Aboriginal, what that looks like today, what it looked like yesterday, and what it may look like tomorrow. As such, this is a collection that forces its audience to confront Aboriginal deaths in custody, systemic and inter-generational rape and child sexual abuse, the ongoing forced removal of Blak children from their families, poverty, and domestic violence. As it should.

'Sinking Below Sight'*,* a peregrination of poverty in Queensland's "Black belt" (p. 41), references George Orwell's 1933 memoir, *Down and Out in Paris and London,* likening the author's return to Woodridge, "one of Australia's ten poorest urban areas" (p. 39), teenager in tow, to Orwell's damning exposé of working-class destitution almost one hundred years hence. Living in the 4114 post-divorce, to Lucashenko, represents "going to the dogs", and yet, she too, "can stand it" (Orwell, 1933). The chapter details the lives of three local mothers, each raising their Indigenous children well below the national poverty line. Selma is terrified of her four Aboriginal sons being taken away from her, and eats bread and butter for dinner, if anything, to ensure her food budget goes to keeping them nourished instead (p. 46). Marie's ex-partner, a convicted child sexual abuser, now has full custody of their 14-year-old son (p. 49). Charmaine's youngest son, in year seven, "told [her]… he was trying to learn not to be hungry, to help out" (p. 51). Each woman found herself under her current circumstances through a series of intergenerational traumas that have continued into their own life: rape, drug abuse, fleeing domestic violence, lack of access to formal education and resources, an Orwellian reality indeed.

In 'I'm Not a Racist'*, But…,* the Anglo-Australian reader is urged to imagine our experience under a modern racial role reversal; how we would feel if we woke "to a world where only one in twenty Australians look like you" (p. 90). Lucashenko details linguistic and communicatory isolation, ghettoisation, poverty and deaths in custody, eliciting empathy from a non-Indigenous audience. I can't shake the thought, though, that I shouldn't have to imagine myself experiencing the plight to care about racial injustice. When consuming Aboriginal literature that "subvert[s] the dominant colonising gaze" (Rose, 2000), the non-Indigenous reader must avoid making it about us, instead platforming the humanity of First Nations Peoples.

Not Quite White in the Head is a difficult read, rightfully so. Rarely are non-Indigenous Australians tasked with confronting the reality of our ongoing settler-colonisation. Aboriginal experiences are not platformed in our news media, nor detailed in our prevailing popular culture. It is our responsibility, then, to seek out First Nations narratives, to de-centre ourselves, and to truly learn from art and writing like Lucashenko's.

It is impossible to read this collection and not understand how the division between settlers and Indigenous Australians affects our day-to-day existence and shapes our cultural consciousness. Its concluding essay, 'What's Changed?' however, harkens the yarn of "the Rainbow Serpent who crisscrossed the continent" (p. 242), shaping the natural formations of the land. Lucashenko's final ruminations look not to divisions, but to the togetherness of all Aboriginal people, as exemplified in the tale of their creation. When "memory… history, lies in the land, and [are] carried through stories" (Rose, 2000), *Not Quite White in the Head* inspires Aboriginal unity. Non-indigenous readers should be inspired to be quiet and listen.

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TEXT review

"We had become a community and so had our stories": Foxes, families and the fantastical

review by Christine Howe



Julia Prendergast and Rebekah Clarkson (Editors)
This is What it Feels Like
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2025
ISBN 9781764106832
Pb 96pp AUD19.95

Edited by Julia Prendergast and Rebekah Clarkson, *This Is What it Feels Like* is a collection of flash fiction and poetry written by five authors who have decades of experience writing short works. The book consists of contributions from the editors themselves, accompanied by further pieces by Shady Cosgrove, Gay Lynch and Billie Travalini. In the introduction, Clarkson invites us to approach this book not as "a random collection by five writers", but as "independently written stories that speak to our innate *interdependence* as human beings" (p. 3). Entering into this book is like being invited into a share house with sixty-four doors opening into compact rooms with varying dimensions – some with wide windows onto vistas far beyond their tiny size; others pulsing with unnamed tension; still others leading down dark corridors onto moonlit beaches or London streets sweltering in uneasy summer heat. Each writer has a

particular style (a Cosgrove room will be shaped by unlikely metaphor; a Clarkson room will reveal some aspect of humanity you've never experienced in *quite* that way before), but each room is entirely its own. This house is also inhabited by foxes – as you read, you might catch a glimpse of a stole, or come face to face with piercing bright eyes. Enter if you dare.

The idea for this book came about at the 16th International Conference of the Short Story in Singapore in 2023, when Clarkson heard Prendergast, Cosgrove, Lynch and Travalini speaking on a panel addressing 'The Importance of Flash Fiction'. After the conference these five writers embarked on a year-long project together, where each periodically emailed the group with a visual prompt to inspire new pieces of writing with a 300-word limit. The rules: "no deadlines, no sharing of writing, no feedback, no obligations beyond sending an image prompt" (p. 1). As Clarkson writes in the introduction, there was a purpose behind their decision not to share the writing itself during this process (beyond simple time constraints). What happens when writers respond to the same visual prompt, but don't read each other's work? Might this "build a natural collective consciousness", Clarkson wondered, one not influenced by each other's writing, but simply by viewing and responding to the same images (p. 2)? When Clarkson and Prendergast gathered the stories together at the end of the year, they found that a form of collective consciousness had indeed emerged, "not just across the stories, but *between* them – in the 'empty' spaces – with an energy more likely to reverberate in story-cycles and composite forms, than in anthologies" (p. 3).

Thinking of this collection as a close relative of a short story cycle provided a useful point of entry for me as a reader. As writer and literary scholar Emma Darragh suggests:

> The short story cycle … is constantly recontextualising. Each story in a cycle offers a new context … The shifting contexts of these stories still, however, feature moments of explicit connectedness to the other stories in the cycle. These moments may be experienced by the reader and the characters as deja vu and are at turns puzzling and entertaining. (2022, p. 11)

This experience of constant recontextualisation is held in tension with the immersive experience of entering into each short piece that in under 300 words, often has the capacity to resonate beyond the confines of its walls. In his introduction to *Micro Fiction: an Anthology of Fifty Really Short Stories*, which include only stories of up to 250 words, editor Jerome Stern suggests that these writers had: "found ways to play upon a very small field, and yet to invent their own imaginative and resonant worlds" (1996, p. 19). In a similar way, the writers of *This Is What it Feels Like* have, with each new piece, compressed the sprawling, chaotic reality of lived experience into under 300 words – whether in poetry or prose. The combination of being immersed in a very short piece for a moment, then recontextualising to enter another – just as resonant – work, makes for an entertaining read.

Two qualities of these pieces that allow them to resonate beyond their perimeter are the hook created by first lines, which invite the reader over the threshold into the story; and the poise of unresolved tension, or flash of insight, held in final lines (as a reader, you might linger in the

doorway for a moment before you either gently draw the door to, or perhaps slam it shut). I'm thinking of Cosgrove's 'After an Election', which lured me in with the line, "Margaret Atwood is my therapist" (p. 22), or the opening line of Travalini's 'What's the point?', which reads, "Later, much later, I thought about telling you I slept with your brother for most of our marriage" (p. 61). Some opening lines are metaphorical, others carry suspense, still others begin with humour, as in Lynch's 'Ode to writers' necks': "Dear neck. Heads have never been the whole point" (p. 65). Many final lines give the sense that this tiny room painted in under 300 words is only a sliver of a much larger relational universe, as in Clarkson's story 'This Is What it Feels Like', which ends with the second-person narrator imagining what it will feel like if/when she sees her estranged son appear in front of her house through her loungeroom window: "Your scalp will burn and there will be thunder in your ears, an open-cut mine in your mouth – fairy floss, a ferris-wheel, a freight-train" (p. 12). Some stories are so short that the first and final lines are one-and-the-same, as in Prendergast's 'Wind', which is also the final piece in the collection: "What I'll miss when I'm dead, presuming we are capable of missing bodily things: the wind on my face" (p. 81).

As Darragh notes, not only do story cycles constantly recontextualise, some stories in a cycle also include explicit connections to other stories (2022, p. 11). It is these moments of connection in *This Is What it Feels Like* that point to the emergence of Clarkson's "natural collective consciousness" (p. 2). One of these connections is the recurring image of the fox. Yes, one of the prompt photographs featured a fox (p. 2), but this on its own doesn't seem to account for the sheer number of foxes flitting in and out of the collection. Foxes haunt these stories. Each time a fox appears, disappears, or reappears, the accretion of meaning complicates the symbolic resonances of previous appearances – both within and between these stories. In Lynch's 'Rewilding', for example, a fox appears in a swelteringly hot London at midday in a kind of "suburban dissonance" (p. 8). The story then doubles back on itself to describe how foxes behave in Australia: tearing out the eyes of lambs, dismembering chickens – the kind of violence that provokes the wrath of farmers who "string them along fence lines, like handmaids hung from the wall to salvage Gilead" (p. 8). Later, the narrator sees a dead fox, its "haunted, vulpine face shattered by a bullet, one mile from the Thames" (p. 9). In this story, the fox is both predator and prey; perpetrator and victim of violence; symbol of colonial destruction and an animal simply trying to survive in her homeland.

Turn the page to Travalini's 'Twentieth Century Fox', and one of the foxes in this story floats into the protagonist's imagination as she lingers in front of the mirror, wondering where the years have gone, while her husband LeRoy calls her from downstairs: "She closes her eyes and imagines she's twenty, with a tiny waist and thick hair fanning over her shoulders like one of those fluffy stoles they made out of dead foxes, back when fur farms dotted the landscape and wearing a dead animal on your shoulder was fashionable" (p. 10). Later in the story, she recalls an article she read in the National Geographic about a Russian geneticist who was studying how many generations it might take to create a fox "house-trained as a French poodle" (p. 10), the implication being that her husband is attempting (and failing) to train her. In this story, the image of the fox is linked to fashion and celebrity, the fur trade, and most of all, women's resistance to being "at the beck and call" (p. 10) of men.

A few pages later, in the final image of Clarkson's 'Leaving in Four' (p. 25), a fox appears motionless at the top of the narrator's driveway and makes piercing eye contact before it disappears: this fox is a messenger, a visitation. Several stories on, in Lynch's 'Delectatio', a fox-fur stole (also evoked in the cover image of *This is What it Feels Like*) appears draped around an older woman's naked shoulders, "like a noose or retroverted womb" (p. 32). Here, the fox is erotic, but underneath the eroticism lies the memory of Lynch's earlier image in 'Rewilding', which likened strung-up foxes on farmers' fences to handmaids being hung from Gilead's walls (p. 8). These stories speak to each other from different points across the collection, and the list of symbolic paradoxes linked to the fox expands to include both captivity-and-freedom, violence-and-desire. Three stories later, a witch walks a fox on a lead in Cosgrove's 'Curses' (p. 37). The witch treats the protagonist, who "wants to hurt a ghost", with kindness and compassion, offering to sit quietly with her on piece of driftwood on the moonlit beach. In contrast to previous stories, this fox is a source of comfort, an earthy reminder of a home far away: "The fox nestled between, and [the witch] held my hand. I could smell the ancient of evergreens and moss" (p. 37).

Finally, the narrator in Clarkson's 'The Night Runners' relates a story her mother told of "a fox that led her back to herself" (p. 42). This fox leaps into her mother's field of vision with the poise of a dancer – a miraculous living apparition – as she follows Adam, her controlling male partner/flatmate/landlord, on one of his "non-negotiable" night runs. Two days later, mother and daughter leave Adam's house for good. Here, the mother feels a profound physical and spiritual connection with the animal: "Later, she said she'd felt the fox's leap viscerally, as though she was one with the fox, as though she *was* the fox" (p. 42). Each time the fox appears, it does so in a different form (living/dead, real/imagined, literal/symbolic). It is never an uncomplicated symbol – paradoxes abound. Beyond the enigmatic nature of the fox (both within and across these diverse works), the one common thread woven throughout is the way the women in these stories turn to the fox as a way of navigating their relationships – with men, with their children, with themselves.

In the introduction to *This Is What it Feels Like*, Clarkson makes the point that "Books tend to show us, through their language and structure, how to read them" (p. 3). If this is the case, the penultimate line of Clarkson's story 'Until then' resonates across the entire collection: "If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel like crying, you should … If you feel an uncomfortable prickling, a quiver of your lip, heat rising: surrender. Because here is something true" (p. 20). The same goes for the range of emotional states prompted by these short pieces – if you feel uneasy, surrender to the uneasiness. If you feel the weight of things unsaid, bear it in your bones. If you're prompted to laugh, give in to the absurd, the surreal, the playful. The "something true" I found in this collection is the sensation that nothing is fixed or straightforward, that decisions reverberate across relationships and generations, and that very short pieces of writing – whether flash fiction or poetry – can evoke intense longing, disappointment, anticipation. This book says: this is what it feels like to be human, and alive, and embedded in relationships – whether chosen, inherited or inescapable – that grapple with what Prendergast calls "that never-enough love" (p. 26). Here we are, in this shared hallway

faced with door after door, and you never know what wonder – or horror – might greet you on the other side.

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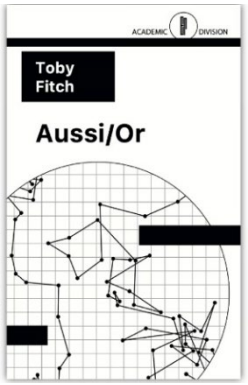
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TEXT review

"at once bound together yet come apart"

review by Martin Villanueva



Toby Fitch
Aussi/Or
Erratum Press, Sheffield, United Kingdom 2025
ISBN 9781916541184
Pb 137pp AUD26.99

Aussi is a French adverb that means "also," "in addition," "as well," and "too," as well as "therefore" and "consequently" (p. 3). It is also used as a comparative ("as") and an exclamatory ("so") (p. 3). "Its English homophone is 'Aussie', of course," says Toby Fitch (p. 3).

Or is a French noun with two different Latin origins: *aurum* (or *orum)* or "gold" or "golden"; *hora,* or "now," "but," "in fact," "as it happens," "thus," or "therefore" (p. 3). Its doublet is *heure,* or hour – and its English homonym is "or", "that infinitely useful word that links alternatives" (p. 3).

Fitch's book-length essay *Aussi/Or* is preoccupied by the multiplicities within and coming out of its own title, what it suggests by way of things that are concurrent with, alternative to, and mutations of each other, what is contingent and fluid over that which is sovereign and fixed, that which are conductors over that which are edified and left untouched.

This – at least to this reader – is Fitch's big idea. And in *Aussi/Or*, this is explored through/with/from three Australian mistranslations of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.

Christopher Brennan's *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope & Pocket Musicopoematographoscope* is a large facsimile of two poems that mimic the appearance of *Un Coup de dés,* composed in the same year, 1897, though published only in 1981, 50 years after Brennan's death. The first to parody Mallarmé, Brennan presented two diverging options for Australian poetry just as Australia was established in 1901 as part of the Commonwealth: "an arguably more colonial poetics" which "was adopted hook, line and sinker in twentieth-century Australian poetics"; or a "far more playfully experimental and subversive" option (p. 37). Enter Chris Edwards and John Tranter.

Edwards' "A Fluke" mimics the visual form of *Un Coup de dés* but queers it with homophony and other "transformational logics": "Edwards […] turns *altitude* into 'attitude' and *aussi loin* into 'aussie loins'. Considering the literary meaning for loins – the region of the sexual organs regarded as the source of erotic or procreative power – we can read into this as saying that, besides the attitude (Mallarmé's hifalutin-ness), his literature (his sexual organ) hangs, much like the shape of the poetry on the page, a little to the right (regarding male genitalia)…" (p. 48).

Tranter's "Desmond's Coupé" is an "uncomplicatedly left-justified, jokey dream narrative that undercuts Mallarmé's inability to make a narrative decision. […] Despite its distance in form and syntax from Edwards' version, the poem's generative technique was the same for Tranter: it's largely a homophonic mistranslation that toys with transformational, paranomastic techniques" (p. 57).

There can be a difficulty in reading Fitch's essay because so much of what one must navigate is a reading of texts that are visual and sonic on top of being textual, while also being material (i.e., the physical artefact – the spread, its gutters – matters in the reading too).

Their discussion of *Un Coup de dés* revels in metaphor and analogy. They see the "Big Dipper" in the poem's fragments (p. 4). They see Brownian Motion in the words on the poem's pages, "random motion of particles suspended in a fluid resulting from their collision with the quick atoms or molecules in the gas or liquid" (p. 4). The poem "explode[s]" from the left margin, says Fitch, like "rocks emerging from the white foam of the sea" or like "ash on the table to be swished about by some diviner" or like "a mobile, hung across a child's crib…" (p. 4).

This exuberance is far from solitary. Fitch brings in the likes of Benjamin, Butler, Derrida, Freud, and Lacan, among others, many of whom have previously riffed from Mallarmé through similar/alternative metaphors and analogies of their own, and/or have theorized punning, translation, and other operations of/on language. That which has spawned cannot be pinned down. So Fitch doesn't. Instead, they draw upon a collective across cultures and decades into an improvised language that swirls towards and out of Mallarmé's conduit text and its Aussie afters.

What I enjoyed most from Fitch is when they get most digressive with what I read to be an impish attitude about where they are willing to stretch towards – like comparing Edwards to Caspar and then Unicorn, complete with cartoon screenshots and an image from Deviant Art. I can't say I'm among the readers Fitch says are easily conditioned by Edwards' queer and deliberate inappropriation of the high-minded language of Mallarmé to possibly see "Spirit self-jettisoned" as "Spirt self-jettisoned" (p. 51). But I'm inclined – quite happily – to suspend skepticism. I'd rather be in on the fun. I trust it because Fitch's project, like all the texts it engages with, is ultimately a political one.

It argues that by "transforming the sounds of one linguistic system […] into the sounds from another", homophonic mistranslation "attempts to subvert or invert the hierarchy of one language over another", the way, for example, Edwards's and Tranter's Australian English subverts the mother tongue and also literary French (p. 86).

It argues for the subversiveness of mistranslation in the face of "hegemonic structures within literature," and thus also for mistranslation's "role in representing those structures in the world" (p. 102).

It presents as inevitable *Un Coup de dés*'s hold on so many poets and artists, especially in Australia, whose history is rife with machinations of a land that was but a void – *terra nullius* – prior to its "discovery," on how such language was encoded in *First Fruits of Australian Poetry,* the first book of poems printed on the continent, authored by Barron Field, a judge of the Supreme Court of Civil Judicature in New South Wales, who used a government printer to self-publish a volume which "virtually plagiarizes" (i.e., passively appropriates) the canon of the motherland, projecting the words of the likes Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge "on to his formulation of the colony" (pp. 104-106).

Out of this history of pillage through/with/in poetry, Fitch impels a reflection on its political implications, all the more of the sort that their essay concerns: "poetry generated by paranomasia – by the difference and sameness in words; a poetry of multiplicity that questions truth, authority, and symbolic structures by understumbling through them, under*mining* them; poetry that 'offers you up' a serious parody, *serio ludere*, a paradox in terms; a poetry of *un*reason that ultimately transgresses the boundaries of the Master, with the desire to dismantle subjectivity and identity-formation – the inverse of Barron Field's" (pp. 109-110).

Fitch writes that "it is clear how *Un Coup de dés* […] has created an archipelagic map that appeals to settler Australian poets seeking otherness and indeterminacy, and a poetic map that allows for rebellion, shadowplay, and the chaos and echoes of the multilingual" (p. 113).

Fitch does not just encourage this rebelliousness.

"Australia is a land built on theft," reminds Fitch (p. 117). And so: "For settler Australian poetry to create notions (archipelagos, say, as opposed to a single nation) of itself, from out of (or within) the *terra nullius* myth that has been perpetuated – it must invert and disperse the hemispheres" (p. 118).

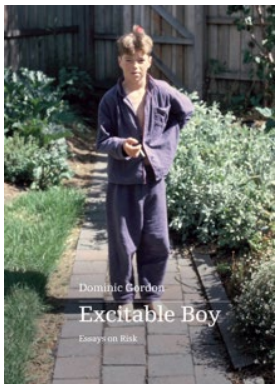
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TEXT review

A walk on the wild side

review by Tarla Kramer



Dominic Gordon
Excitable Boy
Upswell Publishing, Perth 2024
ISBN 9780645874556
Pb 176pp AUD $29.99

I have in my head certain preconceptions of what kind of people can inhabit the world of literature; they can come from a variety of ethnicities and they can be well off or not so well off, but their socioeconomic background is never on the wrong side of the tracks – it's why I found Kathryn Heyman's memoir *Fury* (Heyman, 2021) so startling.

This genteel literary person naturally loves reading, but could also enjoy theatre-going, gardening, learning languages, birdwatching, walking in nature, listening to music, playing piano, travelling to other countries, painting or drawing, etc. They may not like sport so much. But they might enjoy a drink. Or many.

They absolutely do not do the following regularly: steal, frequent sex clubs, jump fences to spray paint rolling stock, get into fights and be knocked unconscious, or consume meth.
Or maybe they do. Dominic Gordon certainly does, on page 18 in his opening essay *The Adelphi Hotel*. This essay launches the reader immediately into Gordon's chaotic existence in Melbourne. Until now, the only thing the reader is expecting is "Essays on Risk," and I was expecting musings on the different types of risks one might take, such as climbing up a 100m rock wall. There are a few moments of such musings later in the book, but not now.
Instead I find myself in the lobby of the "five star, boutique, chrome, minimalist hotel in the heart of the CBD." A young Dominic Gordon has followed some guy into the lift, "I run over and cruise in behind, I pretend I'm with him" (p. 13). He makes his way to the top floor where he takes a dip in the pool but also encounters an older man. "He is long and sharp and resembles a comfortable insect" (p. 14).

Soon the insect offers Gordon a Martini, and at some point Gordon goes into his room. This is where I felt prickling discomfort because the author has not revealed why he is at the hotel in the first place. I'm assuming the insect is some sort of predator. Thankfully nothing untoward happens; Gordon merely produces an ice pipe, and offers some to the insect. It is a strange, dangerous encounter; both Gordon and the insect feel it.

All of Chekhov's writing principles infuse Gordon's direct prose. Unhappy facts are present but only if they're integral to the storyline. His writing has a clear eyedness that asks for no sympathy because everyone in his world had a crappy existence.

Some of the essays are quite brief, describing a single event; others are much longer, such as the one on graffiti, 'Graff – The Writer's Reality'. In this essay of almost 30 pages, the reader is given a peek into an alternative art world, which very few people give any thought to, despite how often we may view the images produced. There is no pay, no government grants, no galleries (apart from railway crossings), no prestigious prizes. Graff artists are only out to impress each other, and with no money for their art coming in, it is necessary to steal the materials.

The nearest thing to winning a prestigious art prize was getting your face on a Crimestoppers notice, which were displayed at major train stations, and Gordon and his associates loved to read them. "I never missed a chance to see who was doing what, and where… 75 per cent of crime in the plastic was graffiti-related and cos Graff was my full time job, sussing it out was like reading the daily news" (p. 43).

No one it seems, had any intention of becoming the next Banksy.

As Gordon explains:

> Back then I didn't have a clue why I really did what I did. That level of self-awareness wasn't available, and even today it's still blurry... There must be a blind spot as to why someone would be so in love with something that has such potential to injure and ruin.

> Maybe operating in the extreme present tense is the juice of it. The air you breathe at that altitude, whether snow-capped high or all the way down low, does strange things to the mind and body. Primal, precipice-close. Alive. (p. 45)

This passage was at the heart of the book, whether the essay was about stealing, fights or running. But still I was left to ponder why some or most people seek safety and others danger; why do most people seek glory and others shame? Why do some people risk everything they own to start a business while others seek the safety of a salary?

I thought the essay on his childhood and family history, *Coming of Age in the Wild West,* might provide some clues, given the narrative concerning nature vs nurture. But his home life wasn't too bad. The parents were not abusive nor neglectful. They merely came from generations of people on the bones of their arses. Most of his friends and fellow graffiti artists had it way worse, and a lot ended up as drug addicts, dead, or in jail. As the narrator states:

> I'm not really sure why so many of my childhood friends from the western suburbs went on to have such troubled lives. But it makes sense if you combine a lack of opportunity for employment after the decimation and collapse of the working classes with shit fathers and mothers with no time outside of work, throw drugs and crime in, and finally, gentrification, as the last nail in the coffin, killing any spirit that was left of the old inner west. (p. 124)

A conversation with Richard Fidler did fill in some information, which probably should have been in the book, such as his ADHD diagnosis, plus something he alludes to which happened to him when he was thirteen, a sexual experience which led him down the path of gay sex, even though he wasn't gay. He also stated that he was acting out of anger in doing Graff – and wanted to be respected by criminals (Fidler, 2024).

And here he is again, taking a major risk by going public with his youthful follies. Is it possible to be prosecuted for any of them now? I also wondered why he might wish to tell them, as it didn't seem like he was seeking absolution, but then again, why does any memoir writer want to tell about their life? Is he like the villain who wants someone to know what he has been able to get away with all this time? Either way, I really felt for his parents, and would like to know if they were brave enough to read such a book.

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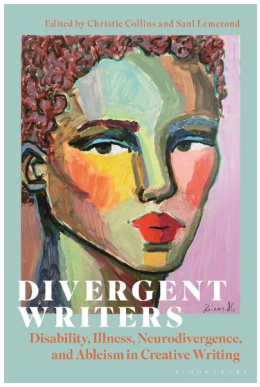
Tarla Kramer lives in rural South Australia. She has had poetry published in InDaily*,* Cordite*,* Borderlands *and Friendly Street* NEW POETS 21. *Her chapbook Poems for the non-compliant was published by Ginninderra Press in 2022, and her first full length collection,* Tango of the Widow*, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2023.*

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TEXT review

Who gets to name the writing?

review by Kylie Evans



Christie Collins and Saul Lemerond (eds)
Divergent Writers: Disability, Illness, Neurodivergence, and Ableism in Creative Writing
Bloomsbury Academic, London 2026
ISBN 9781350501867
Pb 232pp AUD44.99

Divergent Writers, an anthology edited by Christie Collins and Saul Lemerond, features nineteen contributors who examine disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence. The book is organised into four sections that focus on diagnosis and identity, prejudice and representation, teaching practice, and academic and professional life. According to Collins, the anthology has been deliberately broad in scope and organised descriptively rather than prescriptively after it has collected essays (Collins, 2026, pp. 6–7). Instead of a single theory of divergent writing, this collection examines what happens when the expectations of creative writing culture meet the experiences of disability and neurodivergence.

One of the anthology's most notable traits is its refusal to name itself. There is a continual redescription of existing writing practices through clinical, pedagogical, and publishing frameworks throughout the collection. These new redescriptions impact who can interpret the work. These might be a symptom, an adjustment, behaviour in a workshop that is not appropriate, or even material seen as unfit for publication. Often, it is not the writing that changes, but the way people understand it.

Oz Hardwick offers one of the clearest examples. At first, writing was suggested to him as a way of improving his mental health, but it didn't bring about the expected benefits. It wasn't until many years later that he began to develop a consistent daily habit of writing prose poetry. The fact that he had been diagnosed with autism had nothing to do with establishing that practice; rather, the diagnosis allowed him to revisit his past experiences and gain a clearer understanding of his relationship with writing (Hardwick, 2026, p. 44). The activity itself does not change, but how we describe it does. Something that was once seen as controlled by authority takes on more meaning when we view it as an independent and creative practice.

Cath Nichols makes the nature of this retrospective clear. Having been diagnosed as autistic at the age of fifty-two, she looks again at traits which are usually seen as communicative differences – repetition, unusual precision and sensitivity to sensory input – and considers what occurs when these are seen within creative writing as strengths rather than as weaknesses (Nichols, 2026, pp. 28–30). Her conclusion is deliberately cautious in tone: the diagnosis has allowed her to think about both her life and her writing in a different way rather than reducing either of them to a single explanation (p. 38). The past can now be read in a new way, though not necessarily in a simpler manner.

In 'Me Here – You There', K. Iver introduces a new dimension through a psychologist's report which shows characteristics that had previously been concealed, even though the act of writing remains unchanged. It is the way we interpret the work that has changed. Iver describes a "shock of clarity" arriving after years of using language to explain things (Iver, 2026, p. 57). The diagnosis does more than just account for the writing; it alters the way the writer relates to a practice which was already in place.

Julia Lee Barclay-Morton takes the issue from simply describing herself to one of the interpretive authorities. In her chapter she questions the traditional view that autistic people have no "theory of mind" by asking, via M. Remi Yergeau, "Theory of whose mind?" (Barclay-Morton, 2026, p. 61). This line of questioning extends beyond the field of psychology. Who has the right to describe autistic communication, cognition and art – the clinician, the critic, the teacher or the autistic writer? As part of her answer, Barclay-Morton employs an experimental style. Autistic experience is not merely a set of facts that others can interpret; it is in fact a standpoint from which interpretation can take place.

The chapter 'Spinning Words' by Gustavo Henrique Rückert makes the effects of description particularly clear. He starts off by giving biomedical accounts of the language of autistic people as being absent, empty, mechanical, "without metaphor", "without feeling" and "without

subjectivity", a view which he terms a "taxonomy of absence" (Rückert, 2026, p. 136). In his chapter, he then turns this taxonomy on its head. What had before been seen as signs of linguistic deficiency – repetition, rupture, echolalia, visuality, synaesthesia and movement – are now regarded as aesthetic resources. His vivid portrayal of poetry as "stimming with language" goes beyond simply rejecting the idea of deficient language; it reinterprets practices which had previously been seen as absence and restores aesthetic credibility to the writer (p. 137).

A writer might be able to explain their own methods, but that does not guarantee that institutions will accept their explanation. Shane Neilson compares a traditional MFA workshop with a disability-focused poetry workshop to highlight how teaching methods can differ. He challenges the MFA culture, which often values achievement, authority, and credentials, and instead suggests creating "webs of creative care" where access and participation are built into the workshop, not treated as exceptions (Neilson, 2026, p. 121). This raises questions about who gets to speak, how feedback is given, whether people must show confidence, and if it is safe to share personal information. These issues go beyond accessibility and touch on what creative-writing programs see as legitimate participation.

Grace Quantock also faced the same situation in the field of publishing; her proposals concerning the disabled experience were constantly rejected because they were seen as too academic, not cheerful enough, or irrelevant to the average reader, whereas writers who are not disabled were hired to describe the kinds of isolation and adaptation which she had experienced for many years (Quantock, 2026, pp. 78–79). In this case, the dispute over how things are described becomes especially clear. Although a writer may have experiential authority, publication still relies on an institution deciding whether that account is legible, marketable and familiar enough to be circulated.

Divergent Writers stands out because it does more than just say disabled and neurodivergent writers deserve accommodation. It demonstrates that many values in creative writing, like clarity, professionalism, productivity, confidence, relevance, and even what counts as "good" workshop behaviour, already reflect judgments about which writers and writing are considered acceptable. The anthology covers a wide range of topics, including physical disability, chronic illness, neurodivergence, mental illness, pedagogy, publishing, and various essay forms. Because of this broad scope, some distinctions are made quickly and not explored in depth. Collins and Lemerond see this wide coverage as a starting point, not a final classification, and suggest that more specialised work should follow (Collins, 2026, pp. 6–7).

The collection's greatest achievement may not be offering a new way to describe divergent writing. Instead, it reveals what is at risk whenever someone else tries to define it. Clinical language can clarify a practice, while workshop language might diminish it. Publishing language can make it more conventional, but poetic language might help reclaim it. *Divergent Writers* leaves creative-writing culture with a tough question: when someone redefines a writer's practice, who gets to decide what that new description really means?

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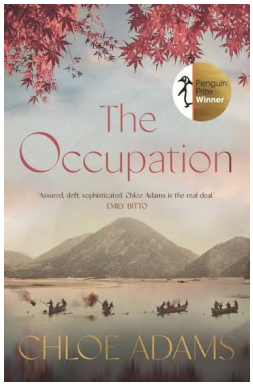
Kylie Evans is Editor of Coastlines *for 2026, having served as Assistant Editor in 2025. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and Digital Media from Southern Cross University. Her short story "A Date With Cecille" appeared in* Coastlines *issues 9 and 10 (2025).*

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TEXT review

The Occupation by Chloe Adams

review by Elizabeth Walton



Chloe Adams
The Occupation
Penguin, Australia 2025
ISBN 9781761351426
Pb 320pp AUD34.99

The Occupation explores attitudes towards Australia women and children in mid-twentieth century Australia, against the unimaginable backdrop of the Allied occupation of Japan following the Second World War. The novel, which won the 2024 Penguin Prize for Fiction, is based on eight letters written by Adams' grandmother Mary during her stint as a war-nurse stationed in Japan in 1948.

By portraying Australians as largely indifferent to the atrocities occurring beyond the army compound near Nagasaki, Adams offers a frustratingly accurate reflection of the narrow-mindedness that characterised Australian attitudes at the time.

In 1945, the Second World War ended when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing over 200,000 civilians. Australian troops were stationed in Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces overseeing disarmament and demilitarisation.

In the first half of the book, Mary is a military nurse, who provides medical care to the allied forces. By now it is 1948, and beyond the safe walls of the compound, Japanese civilians are putting life back together amidst the rubble, and suffering from radiation exposure. Mary falls in love with Sully - an investigative reporter. He is deeply committed to exposing the truth behind the government propaganda and media cover-ups which attempt to minimise the devastating consequences of the only time in history that nuclear weapons have been used in war. But the couple falter when Mary does not have it in her to match Sully's altruism. The deeper theme of the novel is revealed when Mary realises she is pregnant, and the dazzle of romance soon fades.

Though the book title suggests that the focus will remain on post war Japan, the opening scenes are cast in Melbourne, and a meeting between Mary, and her married cousin, Tess. Not only does Tess know about the hidden pregnancy, Tess wants to adopt Mary's unborn child. What follows is a confrontation with the social pressures that made the separation of mothers and their children of the era appear both acceptable and necessary.

Though Mary desperately wants to keep her baby, it Mary's father and brother who enforce the separation. The emotional violence of certain elements of this arrangement is typical of the situations encountered during the forced adoption era in the 20th century, which rapidly escalated after World War II.

Rather than the conventional stranger adoption commonly practiced in that era, this adoption involves cousins in Adams' family. This proximity presents a rare opportunity to pit characters against each other in ways which rarely occurred under closed adoption practices. Both in real life and on the page, Mary objects to her cousin being given her child to raise, simply because Tess is married. This makes compelling reading, and excellent fictional tension.

Australian forced adoption practices were characterised by an extraordinary imbalance of power. Testimonies to Australian government enquiries show that women were denied the right to choose, and also denied any knowledge of what became of their children. Adams uses these events to show the resistance many women felt but were never permitted to voice.

Though adoption is a popular topic in contemporary fiction, it is refreshing to encounter a novel from a writer whose life is situated inside the adoptee family. Adams was raised with two maternal grandmothers – Tess – who adopted Adams' mother – and Mary, whom by this time was well known to be the woman who birthed Adams' mother. This provides Adams with a unique standpoint within which to reflect on a lifetime of adoptive and genetic grandparents, as well as her mother's responses to being told for most of her life that her mother was an aunt.

The result is a novel with a verisimilitude which moves beyond the tokenistic impressions often rendered when writers imagine their way into the usual adoption tropes, which are often woven around emotional fantasies and reunion scenes. Although such inventions often depict familiar adoption scenes, they are rarely approached with the shifting and layered responses, difficult relationships and divided loyalties that adoption presents. Yet the story is told without labouring the guilt and shame that might sink it in less skilful hands. This invites the reader to consider not only what happened to Mary, but what happened to the countless other women whose children were raised by other people, which amounts to almost one in fifteen Australians of that era.

Readers approaching *The Occupation* for an account of postwar Japan will be disappointed, given that the immense and lingering injustices experienced by Japanese people, in the end, is a comparatively minor theme. Yet this seems to be exactly the point that Adams is making: that even in the worst of circumstances, mid 20th century adoption must go on, even if the mother was a capable young woman living independently in another country. Mary was simply, unmarried, and that circumstance on its own was enough to sanction the separation.

Mary's ignorance towards her host country is as much a part of the restrained yet insurgent counter-narrative as the ignorance of her cousin Tess, who shows no concerns about the impact of taking Mary's child. It is a vivid achievement for a debut novelist, made all the more powerful by the knowledge that arises from the fragments of the author's grandmother's story.

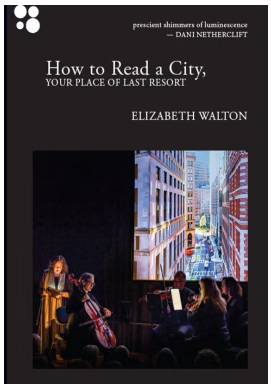
Elizabeth Walton is a writer and musician who has been anthologised and shortlisted for the ACU Poetry Prize, the Woollahra Digital Literary Prize, and the Furphy Literary Prize. In 2026 she recieved a Neilma Sidney Literary Travel fellowship to tour her short poetry cycle How to Read a City, Your Place of Last Resort*, published by 5 Islands Press in 2026. She is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Macquarie University.*

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TEXT review

Songs for a dying world

review by Claire Watson



Elizabeth Walton
How to Read a City/Your Place of Last Resort
5 Islands Press, Figtree NSW 2026
ISBN 9781923248199
Pb 52pp AUD18.00

Perhaps there are two types of people in the world: those who are willing to accept the status quo and immerse themselves in the current reality, and those who lament it. *How to read a city/Your place of last resort* reveals that Elizabeth Walton stands firmly in the latter group. In one of her opening poems, 'Naarm. Your place of last resort', the author is in dialogue with a person of the first type, who tells her to, "ignore the chainsaws/ and all the tree-felling" (p. 9). This person was, "born knowing how/ to read a city' (p. 9), whereas the poet, "was born wondering how/ to breathe in a city" (p. 9). The remainder of the work explores the constant tension of living within a world that is dying.

Walton is a multidisciplinary artist who is also at ease with a musical instrument or a camera in her hands. *How to read a city/Your place of last resort* is her first book of poetry. The work

is a collaboration with another multi-talented artist, Richard Lawson, who first made a name for himself as a punk rock drummer and has since developed his gifts as a multi-instrumentalist and composer. Lawson created the companion piece for Elizabeth's book: a song cycle for string quartet with the same title as the book (p. v). The song cycle was recorded in 2025 by Acacia Quartet, with creative direction from Walton, and the cover photo of this book depicts the world premiere of the song cycle. Other aspects of this multi-faceted project include a film exploring the themes of the work and various promotional events around the globe (Walton, 2026). Although a fuller appreciation of the book is clearly to be gained by accessing some of these other elements, the book itself stands alone as an artistic response to one of the key issues of the post-modern era: climate change.

It is a short collection, which reads like a book of lamentations for a world that no longer exists. Instead of making an appeal to science and reason however, Walton looks to spirituality, and even magical thinking, as a response to the current crisis. In this way, she expresses the post-modern disillusionment with both politics and science and the increasing interest in holistic worldviews, such as the spiritual beliefs of First Nations peoples around the world. For example, in the notes at the end of the collection, Walton explains that the series of poems scattered throughout the book, Parvanes for a dying planet, "draw on protective language and ritual imagination including indigenous Meso-American knowledge traditions" (p. 43).

Her website describes the work as a piece of: "experimental writing that leads the way out of fire and into the Symbiocene" (Walton, 2026). The Australian philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, who first coined the word symbiocene, laments our current Anthropocene age: "the growth-addicted industrial-technological society that has achieved its success at the expense of the vitality of the earth" (Albrecht, 2016). Walton's book is subdivided into sections that reflect the all-encompassing impact of climate change: on the skies and all that fills them, the waters and all who live in them, and on every creature who dwells on the land. All are implicated in the choices that we daily make: "we are all braised and emulsified in the same storyline" (This is a recipe, p. 16). She looks forward to a time when we turn away from planned obsolescence: "then we won't/ need to pretend/ that we can throw things out/ and start again as if though/ this world/ had no end" (Clairaudience, p. 32). The seriousness of the subject matter is relieved occasionally by humour, such as this line in 'Soil punk city': "Growing your dinner/ in floodplain loam/ has become so *chic*" (p. 39).

Although Walton's website describes her work as experimental (Walton, 2026), this collection is accessible to a wide range of readers. There is some interesting play with shape poetry as well as styles of font. She also makes frequent use of chiming and assonance, and there is some memorable imagery, such as: "think of the polyester threading this inky harbour" (This is a recipe, p.16). Her best poems are those in which she shares her heart as well as her cause. 'Mark in mudflats and shifting baselines' is both an elegy for her childhood world that has disappeared, and an elegy for her brother who, "left before you knew/ what would soon/ be whittled down/ in time" (p. 14).

The final section: Renew brings together the loose threads and searches for hope. 'Parvane for a dying planet: Spotted gum' presents a vision of an idealized childhood, and repeats several motifs that appear in the collection: sea eagles, chainsaws and tarwhines. Once again, there is the reaching towards spiritual realm: 'Mabon' (a pagan Harvest festival) celebrates that the earth continues to yield good food. There is further reaching back to the past, to days where, "everything is a work of art–/ the mother of pearl beads/ laced to fading curtains" ('On love's lost days', p. 35). 'In Soil Punk City', Walton finds hope re-investing angst into practical forms of defiance, such as urban re-wilding.

Although Walton claims: "I try not to hold onto things" ('Mark in mudflats and shifting baselines', p. 15), this work betrays that she does; we all do. She mourns the, "once-were-forests, now shopping malls/ thirteen minutes' drive/ from everywhere" (Small gods of Queenstown, p. 27), and clings to memories of her grandfather's world that have vanished. And yet there is ambivalence as well. Her musings reveal that she lives in cities, travels in cars and aeroplanes, and eats dishes cooked in plastic (sous vide) in restaurants. While it is true that we are all, 'braised and emulsified in the same storyline (This is a recipe, p. 16)', it is equally true that we are all complicit in the same wreckage that we lament.

The question that remains in my mind after reading Walton's book is: Although we see climate change as the predominant challenge facing our generation, how willing are we to make the sacrifices that the long road to healing might entail? The first poem, 'Evacuee diary', is an apocalyptic re-imagining of the scene at Mallacoota beach during the 2019-2020 Black Summer fires, where people lament No Vegan Options available at the BBQ and ziplock their credit cards before seeking refuge in the sea. How willing are we to stop updating our i-phones to limit the plunder of rare earths? Or only buy food that is grown locally to minimise freight and carbon emissions? There's a wide chasm between protesting against big business and making the many and difficult personal choices required to bring real change. Perhaps this could be food for Walton's next artistic work.

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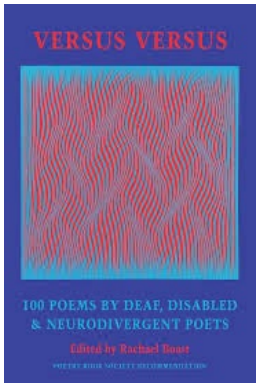
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TEXT review

Facing and turning: Disabled poetics of orientation in *Versus Versus*

review by Caitlin McGregor



Rachael Boast (ed)
Versus Versus
Bloodaxe Books Ltd, Hexham Northumberland UK 2025
ISBN 9781780377315
Pb 208pp GBP14.99

The word *versus,* in its original Latin, means both 'turned towards' and 'against'; it paradoxically evokes both *facing* and *turning*. In the introduction to *Versus Versus: 100 Poems by Deaf, Disabled & Neurodivergent Poets*, editor Rachael Boast writes the anthology's title "was chosen for… how it playfully repeats itself, relishing in paradox but ultimately going beyond, transcending the pitching of one thing against another in favour of a bringing together" (p. 9).

The 100 poems collected in *Versus Versus* cover vast terrain. Many are contemporary, some are historical; several are translated. Many are 'about' disability or neurodivergence in an

explicit way; many are not. There are poems about race, gender, war, love, pain, medicine, sex, bureaucracy; birds, pianos, Disprin, hurricanes. There's a risk, in reviewing such an anthology, of collapsing a vast diversity of perspectives into reductive declarations about disabled and neurodivergent writing en masse. At the same time, I've been thinking a lot about the relationship(s) between disability and poetics over the last few years, and I am of course not alone in doing so. In 2025, for instance, poet-scholars Andy Jackson and Tim Loveday wrote an essay for Griffith Review, asking: *Is poetry disabled?* For Jackson and Loveday, poetry has a "capacity to self-define, to reject conventionality, to be in a constant state of flux and to hold the contradictory together in its granularity". In this, it shares with disability a "capacity for new ways of seeing, knowing and doing" (2025).

Reading the poems in this collection, assembled as they are under the title *Versus Versus*, I started to wonder whether part of this alliance between poetry and disability lies in the way poetry allows disabled experience to be explored and distilled (if not defined) through the lens of orientation. That is, perhaps the "granularity" of poetry exposes and plays with what – and who – we turn towards, and what we turn away from; what we face, what we resist, and from where. Exploring questions of orientation in *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed writes: "Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our attention towards" (2006). Perhaps the "new ways of seeing" that poetry and disability might share rests in a subversive approach to orientation, and therefore to attention.

For example, Andy Jackson's poem in *Versus Versus*, 'Song not for you', is a response to Rainer Maria Rilke's poem 'The song of the dwarf'. In Rilke, the speaker laments "my heart, my blood, / which all hurts because it's crooked" (2011). In Jackson's poem, the speaker resists the dominance of non-disabled perspective: "Crooked blood, stunted hands, cripple, / out of place – uncanny how small / thoughts can be, while I'm incomparable, / only a dwarf because the so-called average / person is taller." Challenging the assumed universality of the 'so-called average person', the poem retorts: "Ever thought / how inflated you must look from this / height?" (p. 35).

In Ada Limón's 'The Endlessness,' also anthologised here, there is again a difference in perception between the poem's speaker and another person – this time, their mother – who operates as a presumed norm that the speaker measures their experience against: "She could see shapes and lines and shadows, / but all I could see was memory, what had been / done to the object before it was placed on / the coffee table or the nightstand." The poem's speaker internalises this difference as a deficit – "Because / of this, I thought I was bad at seeing" – and learns to "become better at pretending / that there are edges, boundaries" (p. 31).

The formal playfulness of poetry offers ways to disable and disorder dominant frameworks of perception and meaning-making, too. David Wheatley's 'Dyspraxia Ode' stretches its word across the page, prompting the reader to mimic the searching motion it describes:

can you can you

locate in a crowded field locate
the one thing necessary (p. 82)

And in a highlight from the anthology, 'Medical History', Urvashi Bahuguna takes the would-be clinical taxonomy of the list and infuses it with human experience and emotion, going on short tangents and adding details that would not usually be included in an actual (this is maybe a slip on my part – by 'actual' I mean clinical, official) medical history: "I have never been pregnant, though I'm told often it buds and ebbs, / and no one ever knows. A whole pond of possibility / quietly blooming and evaporating on its own." Ultimately, after listing various medications and ailments, the medical history trails off: "Forgive me if I can't complete / this history. If there are facts I don't want to record" (p. 65). Framing this agency and resistance within the form of a medical history creates a tension and makes the history strange, drawing attention to how often this agency is missing from medical settings.

In many of the poems in this collection, the complex relationship of *against/towards* held within the phrase 'versus versus' plays out as resistance that begets intimacy. In Daniel Sluman's poem 'the beautiful', crip sex is measured against mainstream depictions of intimacy: "we don't screw like they do on tv." Flipping dominant narratives of disability's 'deficits' on its head, it is 'the beautiful' who miss out on the best love: "lonely as hell / they will never love like this… / cripples love best / because love is an assembly" (p. 106). Threaded throughout these poems are moments of what crip writer Alison Kafer calls "lust born of recognition" (2013): moments where intimacy emerges from disabled people recognising each other as kin. John Lee Clarke's poem opens with such a moment, where the poem's speaker bumps into the writer William Amos Miller at a gas station and is able to clock him as blind from the way he interacts with a juice box: "he turned and held up / A box said what / Might this be I said oh / You're tactile too what's your name" (p. 22). A different kind of crip intimacy emerges in Stephanie Heit's 'ETC. THE RESISTANCE', where a note is smuggled into a psych unit by an ex-patient: "Written on the inside of the napkin accompanying the dinner trays for psych unit patients admitted for ECT treatment" (p. 102). "RUN," it warns. "Get up out of the gurney & get the hell out… / Retract your consent. If you are involuntary or a / minor, we are coming to get you" (p. 103). With its form calling attention to the material conditions under which such a note might be written, Heit's poem demonstrates how resistance to psychiatric incarceration begets creative networks of Mad solidarity and care.

There is also a thread throughout *Versus Versus* of honouring the dead; and of grieving, not just the loss of loved ones and comrades, but the circumstances of disabled lives and deaths that take place in institutions that are, at best, uncaring. In his poem 'For Tyrone Givans', Raymond Antrobus writes that "Tyrone's name was misspelled / in the HMP Pentonville prison system", exposing the fatal lack of care the prison industrial complex provided his friend (p. 66). "There are no hymns for deaf boys", Antrobus writes; and yet his poem writes/rights this wrong, writing Tyrone's name – spelt, this time, correctly and with care – over and over into the archive.

Other poems of grief in the anthology highlight the disabling and intergenerational effects of war, displacement, and colonisation on whole communities. In Sarah Lubala's poem '6 Errant Thoughts on Being a Refugee', she reflects on the pain of leaving her Congolese town of Beni behind: "I should go back / my people are weeping" (p. 57). Ali Cobby Eckerman's 'Kulila' uses repetition to insist upon the importance of remembering and telling the stories of massacres of First Nations people in so-called Australia: "Don't change the story / Tell 'em straight out story / Only one way story" (p. 58). The presence of these poems in an anthology rooted in disability and neurodivergence calls vital attention to the fact that, as Leroy F. Moore Jr writes, "war disables the body, soul, and mind" (p. 118); and that disability always exists and operates within its sociocultural contexts.

I'm still not sure whether poetry can be said to be disabled per se. But the provocation is a fascinating one, and points to a kinship between poetry and disability that can be generative and surprising. If part of this kinship lies in orientation and attention, as I have come to think it does, *Versus Versus* is an anthology that honours this alliance by bringing together complex, varied, and crip ways of paying attention, and of facing the world and each other.

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