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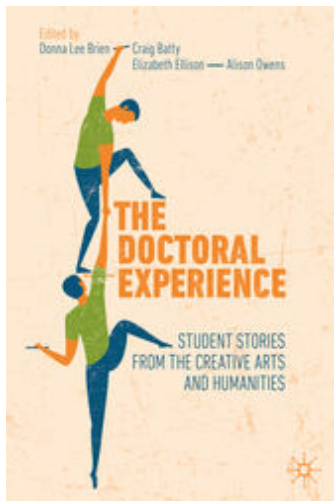
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TEXT review

The doctor will see you now

review by Simon-Peter Telford



Donna Lee Brien, Craig Batty, Elizabeth Ellison, Alison Owens (eds)

The Doctoral Experience: Student Stories from the Creative Arts and Humanities

Palgrave Macmillan

ISBN 9783030181994

253pp AUD38.50

Why hadn't this book fallen into my lap sooner? This will be a question many PhD candidates will be asking themselves. The PhD experience is one of exhilarating highs and crashing lows, often times isolating and confusing. Many candidates are the first in their family to take on the challenges. Supervisors are often stretched thin, universities are now under the greatest pressures, from the fallout of Covid-19, in recent memory, and what social lives that are maintained while undertaking a doctoral degree can feel disconnected

from the reality that is now the life of the PhD candidate. *The Doctoral Experience* aims to be a point of reference and relatability for those who are thinking about taking the journey, are already on one themselves, or those supervisors who want to refresh what it can feel like being the supervised.

The Doctoral Experience is ‘framed by ideas and concepts suggested by the editors, who are experienced doctoral supervisors, but the core content of the book is purposely student-driven and authored’ (p. 2). This gives the book an authenticity that cuts through the sometimes cynicism brought on by hearing advice from those who are not in your position. The authors are, if you are like me, in your position, and that alone helps. It helps break the isolation, the dreaded imposter syndrome. Within the introduction, the editors of the book state:

chapter authors are each at different stages of their doctoral journey (with some just completed), and their stories reflect on key aspects of the journey that had such an effect as to “stop them in their tracks” and encourage them to think more widely than their specific research project. (pp. 3-4)

It is in this way that *The Doctoral Experience* differs from the many PhD guidebooks on the market. This is not a ‘how to write a thesis’ instruction manual or an insider’s tips on how to make it big in academia. The book is, for the most part, an honest discussion, it is a compiled volume of snapshots that act as an instant chat over coffee, something that candidates know are often the most informative and helpful moments along the journey.

The book consists of five parts, beginning with ‘Orienting Towards the Doctoral Journey’ and ending with ‘Completing the Doctoral Journey’. This gives the work a basic chronological timeline to structure itself around, however the editors have chosen to place some chapters out of order, next to chapters that seem to have some compatibility, with the idea being that as one travels through their PhD journey, the lessons we learn and how we learn them are not contained to a chronological order of usefulness. Sometimes, what we learn in our first year may be just what we need to remember in the last few weeks of our manic revisions.

Each chapter mixes personal anecdotes, instructions and revelations with theories on how creative arts and humanities doctoral projects should be conducted. This still gives the book an academic position rather than a colloquial self help styled collection. This has the advantage of acting as a source for our own research and interest into how we study. The disadvantage is that at times sincere statements of the doctoral experience are straddled with a stuffy quote or a reference in a bracket that feels unnecessary, especially if one picks the book up at a time that has been broken away from reading endless articles.

A doctoral candidate may weigh up, as I did when I first realised the book was 253 pages, if there really is time to fit in *The Doctoral Experience*. When first picking up the book, having thirty minutes to myself for lunch, the thoughts that immediately bubbled into my consciousness were ones of trepidation. I need to finish up that presentation. I have the ten PDF files strewn across my desktop screen that I am behind with. An appointment with the doctor, dinner with Mum, a supervision meeting on Friday. Do I have time for a 253-page book that is not directly related to my research? The answer is yes.

I have found that *The Doctoral Experience* works around my schedule. It has earned a spot on my bookshelf where I have gone back several times, sometimes with months in-between. The chapters are labelled in such a way that, when I find myself having trouble, I can pick up the book and search for the section that seems closest to my predicament. If one wishes to read the book cover to cover, they will surely gain much in the way of information. However, a PhD is a journey, and as such, I find the book works best when my journey leads me back to it. Whether it is A. K. Milroy's advice on making space for time (p. 15), J. Newport's reflections on reflexivity and ethical considerations of research (p. 77), or Bernadette Ryan's instructions toward becoming a doctoral-level critical thinker (p. 197), to name a few, *The Doctoral Experience* is an asset no candidate or would-be candidate would be worse off for having. The editors and authors have provided a much needed and immensely helpful book for the future Creative Arts and Humanities doctors of Australia and beyond.

Simon-Peter Telford is a current PhD Candidate with the University of South Australia. His work centres around the Existential Novel and the Anthropocene. He is also a co-editor for reviews with TEXT Journal.



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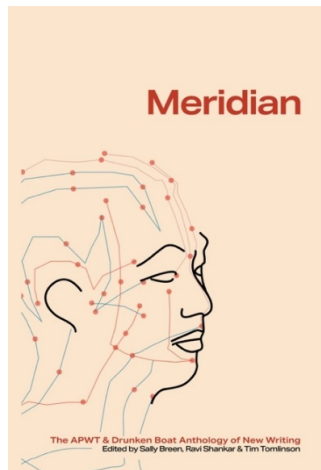
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TEXT review

Writing to change the game

review by Stephanie Green



Sally Breen, Ravi Shankar, Tim Tomlinson (eds)

Meridian: The APWT/Drunken Boat Anthology of New Writing.

Drunken Boat Media. Berkley CA 2020

ISBN: 9780988241633

Pb 224pp AUD19.95

Vicky Seshadri points out in her Introduction to *Meridian* (2020, p. xiii), literary anthologies can be game changers. They can also project profound changes already happening that may otherwise seem invisible. Edited by Sally Breen, Ravi Shankar and Tim Tomlinson, *Meridian* achieves both these things. This anthology of new writing is published through a partnership between the APWT and Drunken Boat electronic literary journal, sponsored by Griffith University with the University of Queensland. Its contributions are brought together in order to generate, as the editors say, ‘a rich

conversation' between established and emerging writers. The anthology reflects current imaginative perspectives and responses to issues within the vast Asia-Pacific region.

This is a diverse collection of writing in more ways than one, encompassing poetry, short fiction, and personal essays. Authors are residents of a host of different countries, including Singapore, Australia, Japan, China, India, Vietnam, the Americas, and the Philippines. Several are expatriates, some hail originally from Europe and the Middle East. Many of the works were originally written in English, and some are translations. While the collection is rich in diversity, however, the pieces show that these authors have shared concerns and characteristics – not least is the strength, vibrancy and beauty of the writing, appreciation for the gift of nature and a determination to sustain a sense of humanity amidst the turmoil of an unsettled, post-post-colonial world.

Meridian asserts a newly confident Asia-Pacific literature 'suffused with a sense of beginning', as the editors express it: a conversation that follows a trajectory that aims to transcend simplistic assumptions of the notions of East and West. The anthology offers a mix of mature and youthful voices, all expressing possibilities that are sometimes fragile, sometimes hopeful. Through the senses as metaphor, whether told from experience or invention, *Meridian's* writers convey a melting world of cultures yet still retain moments of exquisite specificity; like the distinctive taste of hokkien noodles that bring a grandmother and granddaughter together in Serene Goh-Jin Hong's story 'Grandma in the Kitchen' (2020, pp. 41-46) or the 'left over Russian Soldier's cigarettes' in Ashwani Kumar's 'Hotel Budapest' (p. 133). With a similar particularity, poet Jose Varghese captures the delicacy of flow amidst a drying content (p. 1), Jason Eng Hung Lee reminds us of the unrestrained chaos of a Tsumani (pp. 11-12), and a small square of lawn makes one small, fragrant space for nature, heritage and the pleasure of living in Leza Lowitz's story 'The Reflecting Pool' (pp. 15-18).

There are fierce pieces of writing in this collection that draw on memories and powerful associations to create narratives and poetry that looks boldly at the reality of big power politics and the devastation of human suffering. Shymala Abeyratne conveys the lingering 'smell of gasoline and acrid smoke' that envelops a community destroyed by war (p. 129), while Sahib Nazari recalls the tragedy of fanaticism in the 'cries of the blue sky, bleeding red' (p. 183). Bashir Sakhawar's story of escape and return to a harrowed village known as 'the ditch' is told with irony and subtle humour as it captures tragedies wrought by the 'venomous snake of war' in Afghanistan (pp. 3-8). While Joshua Zelesnick offers a poem of fury and frustration at human violence and hubris, the 'blind spots' of false promises and positive thinking (pp. 21-23). Lawdenmarc Decamora's impressionistic poem 'Democracy Jr' observes the 'gift of democracy' as the 'narrative of forgetting in peacetime', reminding us of the 'crooked teeth of society' that snatch at safe passage and a peaceful life (p. 79).

Reflections on a more personal politics of vulnerability, inequality, danger and loss are also present in this collection, for example with Ira McGuire's 'Opposite of Equinox' which navigates 'the possibilities of this dark path' that marks out the passage of young adulthood. Indyana Horobin offers a sensitive story of home and homelessness, with promises of renewal (pp. 25-29), while the grim dying of a grandmother is powerfully portrayed by Adam Narnst in 'Rum and Smokes' (pp. 195-201).

The search for closeness is also explored in this collection, beautifully captured in the 'purple-veined lily' from Merlinda Bobis's 'Bigonia Rosa' (p. 125), the sucking tide as a metaphor for loss in Jane Frank's 'Walking to Angourie', the peanut butter and apple sandwich from John Brantingham's 'Still Life with Fowl' (pp. 143-144), and the gut-wrenching short story of a fruitless drive to see an imprisoned mate in Brendan Federovowicz's 'Cessnock Screws' (pp. 91-92).

Meridian is not the first creative writing anthology to be produced with an Asia-Pacific focus, of course. Edited by Albert Wendt, *Nuanua: An Anthology of Pacific Writing in English Since 1980* (1996) showed the breadth, confidence and richness of late twentieth-century contemporary literature from the region. Other anthologies have adopted a special focus, or were directed at specific audiences, such as Sharon Lim-Hing's gathering of Asian & Pacific Islander lesbian writing *The Very Inside* (1994). Published the following year, *Voices Nearby* edited by Paul Grover (1997) offered a creative writing resource for high school students. A decade later, *Windows to Southeast Asia* (2007) featured a wide range of written material, from academic essays to fiction, edited by Low Lih Jeng and Nelly Kwa. A more recent example is *The Near and the Far: New Stories from the Asia-Pacific Region* edited by David Carlin and Francesca Rendle-Short (2016) which emerged out of a program of collaborative workshops that aimed to provide a 'genuinely plural space' for Asia-Pacific writers and writing.

Meridian has some affinities with this last example, in the sense that it has emerged from a deliberate attempt to foster the work of writers and translators work from the region. It reflects the flourishing efforts of Asia-Pacific Writers and Translators Inc., which each year brings together writers, translators, editors and publishers through a variety of events and activities. This new anthology makes large claims. Its editors argue that the book reflects a new kind of literary republic: 'a huge, various, enormously vibrant area bound together by English as the lingua franca; an area exploding with young energy, where the need for the self-knowledge that literature can supply is exigent and extreme' (Seshadri, 2020, p. xiv).

As an Asia-Pacific writer, born in Port Moresby to Australian parents, who has lived in various parts of this region, for me this anthology speaks creatively to what matters – to the sense of a pressing moment of human and environmental concerns. Some pieces evoke intense attachments to place, others trace the movements of people in unsettled times and

the meridian lines of strength and healing that make new and old connections possible. Together, these works show the importance of words to help us know the real, through the raw experiences of complicated, often vulnerable, often unintentional, lives. *Meridian's* authors are highly sensitive to the lasting impacts of military, environmental and economic conquest. These are vibrant, daring voices with little nostalgia for the past as they explore longing and loss, growing up in hard places, finding solace or choosing to make a fearful sacrifice. At the same time, this new anthology is threaded through with the vibrancy of cultures, histories and memories that should never be forgotten.

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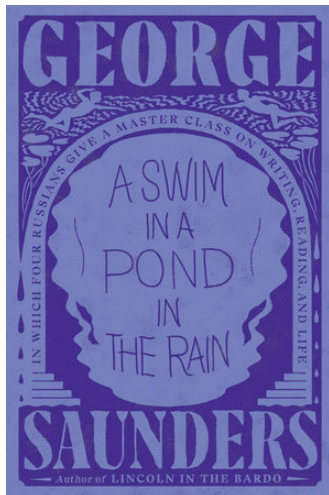
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TEXT review

It's a story not a webcam

review by Michael Kitson



George Saunders

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain (In Which Four Dead Russians Give Us a Masterclass In Writing and Life)

Bloomsbury, Random House 2021

ISBN 978198485602

Hb 432pp AUD34.99

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain is a distillation of writer and teacher George Saunders 'twenty years forced acquaintance' with the short works of Babel, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Tolstoy and Turgenev. Here is the essence of Saunders' class taught at Syracuse University in New York state, or rather, his notes distilled, reduced, clarified. '[A first draft] doesn't need to be good, it just needs *to be*' and, 'You don't need an idea to start a short story, you just need a sentence', are both, as far as How-to 'creative writing' (and its lesser-known

1

cousin ‘creative reading’) texts go, pretty good advice; and which *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* delivers in spades (p. 112).

Whilst this book’s deliciously cool title could be attributable to Anton Chekhov’s short fiction ‘Gooseberries’, it is in fact, Saunders’ own ‘event summation’ drawn from that story; what a creative writing practitioner like you might refer to as a scene, beat, point of plot; but which George Saunders prefers to term ‘meaningful action’ (p. 14): That is, an emotionally, impactful and non-trivial event, that escalates a story by moving it forward.

You might wonder why Saunders needs new jargon, especially if there are already perfectly good terms out there. In Saunders’ defence, this new vocab is refreshing, and despite falling back on a few of those old chestnuts, like E. M. Forster’s disambiguation of story and plot [1], or a cursory turn to Freytag’s Triangle, his approach feels original; breathing a new life into the old or common.

Take Saunders’ description of reading as a ‘linear temporal phenomenon’ and from which he concludes that writing must charm us word by word, line by line, page at a time. Saunders turns to the example of Bill Bufford, past editor of *The New Yorker*, who told Saunders how he finds the brilliant fictions that grace its pages: ‘I read a line. And I like it ... enough to read the next’ (p. 9).

Saunders is a ‘plodder’: someone who works intuitively; writes a sentence, shapes it, edits it, feels happy with that, writes the next one, does the same, and so on. Saunders outs himself as not being a ‘plotter’ when he says, three act structure gives him constipation – so don’t expect insights into structural elements like pinch points, mid act climaxes, or high tower surprises (leave that to the screenwriting gurus).

Perhaps a distrust of scaffolding results from coming to his writing career backwards; Saunders took his undergraduate in Engineering at the Colorado School of Mines where on summer break, he worked in the oil fields of Sumatra alongside an ex-con, addicts and a Vietnam vet – all of whom made their way into Saunders’ Hemingway-esque juvenilia. It was reading Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* that changed Saunders’ life and propelled him into a Creative Writing MLA; ‘The Program’, at Syracuse University where he graduated alongside wife, Paula Reddick and the likes of Tom Perrotta in 1988. Saunders then returned to oil and gas work to support his young family, writing and publishing short works until a decade later, he was invited back to teach ‘ENG 650 (Forms): The Russian Short Story in Translation (for Writers)’ at his *alma mater*, Syracuse.

Taught in a casually-Socratic seminar format, Saunders taught six of the brightest young authors culled from 700 applicants. These students arrived having read the week’s story; Saunders delivered an essayistic-lecture addressing the work before them, there was

discussion and a line-by-line, page-at-a-time read through with regular interruptions for Q and A, before a rounding off with Saunders' summation.

For his book, Saunders has picked just seven stories from four Russian authors and these are not necessarily their author's best work but chosen because they 'pop[ped]' in his classroom (Silverblatt, 2021). Unlike digital handbooks compiled for today's students, a book's print-bandwidth means that even Saunders' favourite, Chekhov's masterpiece, 'Lady with the Little Dog', was excluded. However, I note that Gogol's 'The Nose' is here – which, along with Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' – is a seminal influence on Saunders' absurdist humour as grounded in quotidian settings.

Saunders describes his approach to these Russian stories as not that of an academic, scholar or literary critic; further, Saunders warns us he speaks no Russian [3] and is no expert in either Russian literature or its translation. Rather, Saunders sees himself, more as a vaudevillian, or, perhaps a carnival barker, enticing us into his show tent, where, 'We might imagine a story as a room-sized black box. The writer's goal [being] to have the reader go into the box in one state of mind and come out in another' (p. 304).

Saunders' approach to his subject is manifold: an introductory essay, then teacher-led, New Criticism-style elucidation, with pauses to consider points of story and just how the writing is affecting us. All of this is purposed towards 'unlocking our ability to write emotionally moving stories that the reader feels compelled to finish' (p. 4). In regular pauses, Saunders asks us to reflect on what we know, where we are, who we have met, what we expect to happen, and how we feel? A story is as a table, says Saunders, upon which just a few objects have been gathered and it is our role to wonder how they will be used.

His process allows for a story's bewitchment and our enjoyment in the naïve pleasures of the text but then at the end of each page of story, an engineer at heart, Saunders wakes us from our reverie, has us switch hats and examine the writer's technique and asks how our emotions are being summoned, affected and manipulated? And as magpie writer-readers, it's this expert deconstruction and retro-engineering, from which we, as writer-readers hope to gather new tricks for our writer's toolkit.

On the one hand this book, with its close study of the internal mechanics of storytelling, appears to be Saunders' answer to second novel blues, on the other, it is a useful public platform in which to thrash out past trauma; one arisen from Saunders' uncomfortable role as public analysand in literary critic, Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009).

Picking up where D. G. Myers' *Elephants Teach* (1996) left off, McGurl's *The Program Era* was a ground-breaking critical cultural history, tracing the rise of The Creative Writing Program from its invention in the late nineteenth century;

its seedling growth in the first half of the twentieth century in the context of progressive education, its singular ... manifestation in the form of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and its slow and then sudden growth thereafter into the present and around the world. (McGurl, 2016, p. 249)

McGurl suggests that The Program – creative writing in the American academy after WWII – became institutionalised and institutionalising: and that such a sausage machine might silence or lose original voices and stories [2]. McGurl asserts that Saunders and his writings are a product of The Program's hegemony, while Saunders' return to teach within that system might suggest a hermetically-sealed, self-consuming, ouroboros. McGurl even applies a kind of Creative Writing *DSM-V*, to Saunders' pathology, diagnosing Saunders' in a doctor's shorthand:

short stories, most of them published in *The New Yorker*, can be thought of as the crossing of Carver's lower-middle-class 'loser' aesthetic with some of the surreal craziness and violent public sphericity ... of Donald Barthelme. (2009, p. 403)

As Mark Twain protested, so too might Saunders, taking offence at this before his time, 'grossly exaggerated' obituary but also his inclusion in McGurl's bestiary, wherein McGurl reduces Saunders to a chimera of Minimalism and Technicity.

In layman's terms, McGurl says Saunders is a 'second generation minimalist'; his writings are a hybridising of Carver's blue-collar 'losers' with Ethnicity's cousin, Technicity; or what McGurl explains as:

what [Philip] Roth knows about the Jewish experience, and [Toni] Morrison knows about the African American experience, writers like [Richard] Powers, [Don] DeLillo, and [Thomas] Pynchon know about the second law of thermodynamics, cybernetic causality, communications and media theory. (2009, p. 62)

Here, the implication is that without colourful ethnic heritage to draw on, Saunders like other middle class, privately-educated, privileged, white, cis, male, boomer writers who grew up on science fiction and comic books and came to literature late, turn to technology and a postmodern trickery infused with the mundane, for their message, their cultural heritage and inheritance.

What I believe saves Saunders from such denigration is his wacky absurdist humour. Take his story 'Pastoralia', which, without comedy could well have been drawn from the grit reality of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2001): A caveman and colleague, cave woman; performers in a cash-strapped theme park, have their daily routine disrupted when

their cave's 'slot' fails to provide the daily prop, a rationed leg of goat, heralding a passive aggressive standoff with the theme park's neoliberal management.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Saunders dedicated the next eight years following the publication of *The Program Era* to freeing himself of McGurl's necrotic compartmentalising, and, to prove he wasn't fixed in such a slot, Saunders set about beating the Carver-curse, writing – something that Carver never managed – a novel.

Set on the eve of the American Civil War *Lincoln in the Bardo* requires a working knowledge of the origins of that conflict, but the majority of its readerly-engagement comes from its central tragedy; the typhoid death of Abraham Lincoln's eleven-year-old son, Willie. The novel takes place around Willie's body laid out in a borrowed crypt in Georgetown, Washington D.C., where Lincoln returns to hold him while the shades of the un-departed – many of them historical figures – hover and comment. *Lincoln in the Bardo* feels like a whizbang idea for a mind-blowing weird short fiction but one that in its writing blew out to become the short novel that it is.

Beginning in omniscient third person narration, *Lincoln in the Bardo* drops away to sparse pages of footnoted quotation. As a bookseller accustomed to Saunders' fabulously odd short fictions, *Lincoln in the Bardo* mystified me; as it did my colleagues and the majority of our custom: the phrase we oft-heard was, 'I didn't get it'. It did win champions, like Melbourne drummer, Ash Davies who was enraptured by its verbal rhythms.

Four years later, Saunders says he still doesn't know what his next novel will be, so *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* on one-level is the publication a publisher puts out when its author is hot but hasn't got a novel ready to go. For us, creative writing practitioners and teachers, it's a fabulous windfall.

At the same time, it is also a rebuff to McGurl's and *The Program*'s forcing Saunders and his writing into a slot. In *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* Saunders tackles McGurl's labelling of him as 'second gen minimalist'.

Minimalists were largely, male writers of American origin, whose work, influenced by New Journalism, appeared in the Sixties and Seventies and were committed to putting just the right word in just the right place with their precision compared to that of the artisanal watchmakers of Geneva.

Subsequently, when Saunders talks of the Russians' and their fastidiousness, he suggests that such a fastidiousness is also the shared ancestry of the minimalists. Saunders suggests that 'Gooseberries', praised for its compactness and precision, was in fact, so fastidiously-

built, as simulacrum, it is in fact, utterly unreal. I can't help hearing this argument as Saunders' much rehearsed rebuke to the taxonomising he was subjected to by McGurl.

In *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* Saunders suggests that the influences upon 'minimalists' were not, first and only, Hemingway but rather a shared tradition that drew from outside The Program and that the minimalists were drawing upon a secret but common ancestry, derived from the Russian short story. This can even be illustrated in Ray Carver's toast to Anton Chekhov's deathbed with 'Errand', that saw Carver hailed as 'The American Chekhov'[4]; and his friend, Richard Ford (although coming to Chekhov late) go on to edit and introduce, *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* (1998), while Saunders himself, credits his coming to Chekhov as an epiphany of 'spiritual belonging' when a student at Syracuse, Tobias Wolff read aloud to class, Chekhov's 'Little Trilogy'.

Asked why, after coming through an assisted, fast track program like Syracuse, some writers succeed and others don't, Saunders answers, just two things: First, he says, a willingness to revise; and endlessly; that he says as writers, it's all we've got, it's where 'voice' comes from and it's how we distinguish ourselves and our language from anything that has gone before. Second, Saunders says, it depends on the extent to which the writer has learned to make causality a tool of their writing – a story is not a webcam (p. 19), it is not an anecdote – and causality is to the writer, what melody is to the songwriter (p. 225), it distinguishes the competent practitioner from the extraordinary.

You too may find, like Coleridge's waylaid wedding guest, having idly raised Saunders's book to your eyes, that you're held – collared perhaps – by this salty old writing dog and unable to put it down.

Whether you teach a university course introducing the basics of creative writing to first year undergrads, teach units like, TAFE's 'Story Elements', and 'English Literature for Writers', or a specialised theoretical overview of writing short fiction, run workshoping, or need a common text (and language) to share with your post grads, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* will suggest new approaches, refresh your methods and lead you to reappraise your idiom.

If I have still not convinced you of this book's merit, let me leave you with Saunders' words:

For those who are writers, who dream of someday writing a story like the ones we've loved, into which we've disappeared pleasurably and that briefly seemed more real to us than so-called reality, the goal is to attain the state of mind from which we might write such a story. (p. 6)

This book will deliver you that state of mind.

Notes

[1] ‘The king died and then the queen’ is story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is plot.’

[2] This reminds me of Don DeLillo’s campus novel *White Noise* (1985) and set at College-on-the-Hill; wherein the protagonist, Jack Gladney is Head of Hitler Studies, but cannot speak, write or read German.

[3] It should be noted that McGurl counters this in his concluding remarks, saying that he believes the Academy is doing more to support innovation, experimentation and new voices than a megalithic, dollar-driven publishing industry. For a critical response published by Iowa University Press, academics responded in 2016, *After the Program Era: The Past, Present and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, edited by Loren Glass. Unfortunately, it is, overall a drab exercise, with its only Australian contribution an exceptionally opaque piece by Professor Simon During and someone not known for contributing to, or teaching in, the field of creative writing.

[4] It was the British that hailed Carver ‘the American Chekhov’ thanks to Peter Kemp’s headline for his obit of Carver in *The Sunday Times* (1989).

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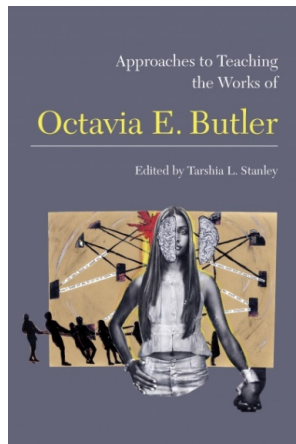
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TEXT review

Octavia E. Butler and speculative fiction in the classroom

review by Jennifer Ngo



Tarshia L. Stanley (ed)

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler

The Modern Language Association of America, New York 2019

ISBN 9781603294157

Pb 168pp AUD39.00

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler, edited by Tarshia L. Stanley, Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences at St. Catherine University, is a collection of essays that explores Octavia Estelle Butler, who was an American science fiction author, and her work, from a number of perspectives. In the introduction, Stanley notes:

There is currently no comprehensive teaching volume dedicated to black speculative fiction, although there are articles that develop theories about that fiction, collections that frame discussion about it, and anthologies that document its practice. (p. 10)

Stanley sought to fill this academic gap and does so by centring this collection around Butler, ‘whose work allows both the framing and theorizing of black speculative fiction for the classroom’ (p. 10). Stanley has curated an interesting collection of essays that introduces Butler’s work and highlights her significant contribution to science fiction and literature, all the while providing varied approaches in how educators can go about teaching Butler in the classroom.

This collection is divided into two parts; ‘Materials’ and ‘Approaches’. ‘Materials’ provides a book list of Butler’s major works with their original publishing dates, texts taught along with Butler’s work and highlights of the survey responses from professors used by Stanley to contextualise the topic of this collection. This extensive list of materials suggested by survey respondents is undeniably aimed at instructors, but I believe can be useful for someone who may be interested in learning more about Butler and some of the ideas presented by the contributors following the completion of this book.

‘Approaches’ contains the introduction and essays. The introduction provides a concise and informative summary of Butler that is both important and useful to those who are and are not familiar with her work. The essays are sorted into four chapters, ‘Literary and Rhetorical Approaches’, ‘Disciplinary Strategies and Innovations’, ‘Social Justice and Social Change’, and ‘The Aesthetics of Afrofuturism’. As the chapter titles suggest, each covers different topics and the contributors have outlined their various approaches to teaching Butler in concise yet informative essays. They cover the topics in a compelling and detailed way with many including questions they asked their students, what worked, what did not, student reactions to certain things and more. The essays even highlight books they teach alongside Butler with some suggesting other books that also may work. The contributors have discussed their teaching approaches and how they themselves used Butler in their syllabus in a way that seems very helpful for educators or instructors who also wish to introduce Butler to their students.

However, I did notice that the chapter regarding Afrofuturism was fairly short compared to the previous chapters. While the three essays in this chapter were brilliant reads and very thought-provoking, after completing the book I did wish there were a few more essays on Afrofuturism. Although, perhaps the shorter length is the result of the more specified topic and lens Butler’s work is being viewed through. I have come across this term briefly before, but I did not know much about it. I very much enjoyed learning about the complexities of Afrofuturism, how it links with Butler’s work and the approaches Stanley as well as Isiah Lavender III and Kristen Lillvis take in introducing Afrofuturism through Butler’s work.

This collection truly excels in demonstrating the range of ways Butler can be read and taught, the various topics, issues and lenses her work can be viewed from and discussed in

addition to literature courses. Sami Schalk, for example, pens a very informative essay, called ‘Teaching the Social Construction of Disability through the Parable series, Lilith’s Brood and Seed to Harvest’ (p. 97) that positions a section of Butler’s work within disability studies and how this can be taught. Claire P. Curtis highlights how Butler’s works, specifically *Bloodchild and other short stories* (2005), can be studied from a political philosophy perspective in ‘The Politics of Living Together: Butler’s Short Stories and Teaching Political Philosophy’ (p. 52). Stanley has compiled a collection of essays by contributors who all do an exceptional job of discussing Butler’s works in relation to whichever theory, topic or issue relevant to them with examples in a way that reads clearly and can make sense for all readers, regardless of whether they are or are not familiar with Butler’s works.

While I may not have been the intended audience, that being other teachers and instructors, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler* aided me as a creative writer by helping me develop a better understanding of not only Butler’s works of fiction but also her legacy, impact and influence in the science fiction genre. Of particular value were the book’s insights into how speculative fiction has the potential to tell stories of issues such as social justice. Stanley’s curated essay collection also bears potential for readers, writers and instructors to adapt and extend the ideas, methods and approaches for their own courses and purposes, for example by exploring similar points in relation to other writers. Overall, this book is very informative, engaging and easy to follow. I recommend it not only for those interested in approaches for teaching Butler as well as other literature, but for anyone interested in speculative fiction, African American writing, or writing and literature as a whole as it provides a perspective that furthers our knowledge and understanding of these areas. This collection also presents a rich and insightful introduction to someone whose work has had such a significant and lasting impact on the science fiction genre.

Jennifer Ngo is an artist, writer and Creative Writing Honours student at the University of South Australia.



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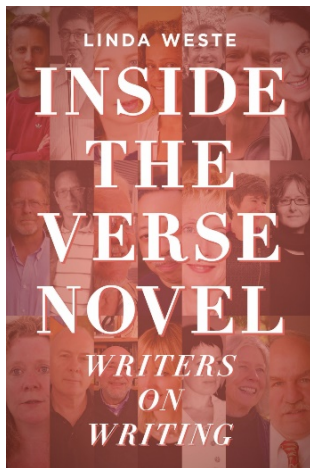
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TEXT review

The contested archipelago: Verse novels as liminal and liberating

review by Sarah Pearce



Linda Weste

Inside the Verse Novel: Writers on Writing

Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne VIC 3051

ISBN 9781925984255

Pb 182pp AUD 39.95

The rules of verse novels, if they exist, are still fluid; no-one I'm sure really knows what a verse novel is, and let's hope it stays that way. (Wearne qtd by Weste, p. 128)

Linda Weste's edited collection of interviews with a wide variety of authors who have written verse novels provides a fascinating insight into a particularly mutable and, at times, complex and difficult form. The 22 interviews contradict, intersect and dovetail with one another in surprising and delightful ways to give a detailed but by no means – because this

1

would be impossible – comprehensive account of the act and process of writing a verse novel.

The interview questions address such aspects as the genesis of particular works, the writing process(es), any difficulties encountered along the way and the privileging of narrative over poetic techniques and vice versa and why this was required or desired. The questions had sufficient breadth to elicit a reasonably comprehensive picture of writers' perspectives on the form generally and on their own approach to writing.

In terms of the interviews themselves, I noted a (seemingly) varied degree of willingness on the part of different writers to share their influences, writing process and thoughts on the possibility of the form. This led to an occasional sense of imbalance between different writers' voices and I was dismayed to discover that the white, male writers took up more space than the writers of other backgrounds. Of course, it is impossible to determine whether this was the consequence of the particular questions asked, Weste's affordances in terms of what she viewed as worth including in the finished text or, indeed, the fact that white male writers are so used to taking up space. Despite this issue of balance, I was relieved that Weste did manage to elicit several nuggets of negative criticism. Although many authors claimed to have read few verse novels and, thus, avoided offering much in the way of criticism, or mentioned the same few key influences, Sarah Corbett was willing to occupy some space with refreshingly blunt criticism of certain classics of the genre, such as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (p. 96).

Almost all the writers agreed that the verse novel form is difficult to sell to either publishers or the public. If a reader is afraid of poetry, they will be even more afraid of a verse novel. However, an illuminating work such as this, that renders a difficult and, by degrees, perhaps unapproachable form more visible and accessible, may go some way to addressing this issue of audience and marketing.

One of the central 'problems' of the verse novel is its generic liminality – is it really a novel, or a long or epic poem, or something else entirely? Catherine Addison, for example, argues that 'long narrative poem' is the 'definitive, and adequate, taxonomy' of the verse novel (2009, p. 544). Although many critics have argued that prose is a defining characteristic of the novel, and some – including Mikhail Bakhtin, who famously both accepted the existence of novels in verse and declared the novel to be a 'prose genre' in the same sentence (Addison, 2009, p. 549; Bakhtin, 1981, p. 9) – are divided upon the point, the 'verse novel' has become an accepted, though not uncontested, genre.

The lines between prose and poetry have long been blurred. David Copperfield, in addition to other classic prose novels, exhibits passages of nigh-iambic pentameter (Saintsbury, 1912, p. 381), calling into question the relative distance between what we recognise as

‘novels’ and ‘poetry’. It should of course be noted that the English language itself is quite iambic and, thus, lends itself to the meter.

Fundamentally, seeking to define a strict dichotomy between poetry and prose seems pointless or, at the very least, misguided: ‘at least some of the skill of writing free verse in memorable lines must be the same as the skill of writing prose in memorable phrases’ (Addison, 2009, p. 553). It is possible to apply the hybrid label ‘verse novel’ to a wide range of texts that ‘like electrons, may exist in two places simultaneously, in subgenres of the novel and of the narrative poem’ (Addison, 2009, p. 555). Although the question of the dialectic between poetry and prose remains an intriguing one, it is not, after all, the point of Weste’s collection of interviews. The point is the writing of this hybrid form – how and why it is done.

As Weste highlights in the introduction, the verse novels under discussion are united by exhibiting both a poetry and a narrative component – or, both *poeticity* and *narrativity* (p. xi). The discussions around how to privilege, sacrifice and balance narrative and poetics proved to be the most interesting of the book. Opinions diverged quite starkly regarding the primacy of poetic and narrative techniques in general and in the verse novel form specifically.

For Ros Barber, ‘narrative is more important to me than anything else, and everything must bow to serve it’ (p. 73). Conversely, ‘the poetic strategy of modernist “juxtaposition”’ is more important to James Cummins ‘than the expository stretches of a novel’ (p. 153). To Sarah Corbett, however, finding a balance between narrative and poetics is crucial:

[It is] the greatest challenge open to the poet with the verse-novel if the poetry is not to be sacrificed to plot. It had to become, for me, one complete poem as well as read as a whole, immersive novelistic experience for the reader. (p. 93)

George Elliott Clarke employed a flexible approach, choosing ‘to stress lyric over narrative to give intriguing glimpses or sound bites of mental states and/or events, but used narrative prose to give extensive detail’ (p. 26). The flexibility of the form is attributable in part to the porousness of generic boundaries; to Bernadine Evaristo, ‘the verse novel is a form of reinvention that can embrace the best of both genres – fiction and poetry’ (p. 10). She uses the question about narrative and poetics to comment on the form itself: ‘the verse novel form enables a space where at times the poetry or the story might predominate over the other’ (p. 9).

Brian Castro takes a more subversive view of the form that suggests something almost destructive in the privileging of poetics over narrativity:

I think the verse novel, if we fling out its obsessive versifying, is the great enemy of story-telling; I say this positively. It returns the reader to rhythms and presences and to the archaeology of words. It slows down time through compression and storage. It brings back enrichment to a literature which seems to have been degraded by Story. (p. 81)

If the verse novel is the enemy of storytelling, perhaps it is also the enemy of genre. As Jacques Derrida highlighted, a rigid view of genre engenders the following situation: ‘as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity’ (1980, p. 57).

Arguably, the verse novel is, therefore, a problematic form; it is impure, anomalous and monstrous – affected, even contaminated, by various other forms and genres and the crossing of these boundaries: ‘the boundaries are and should be porous’ (Evans, p. 10). As an ambiguous, threshold form, the verse novel extends fingers towards the traditional prose novel and poetry, quite obviously, but also towards historical fiction, music and drama.

Many of the verse novels discussed were historical in nature; it quickly became clear that verse was used as a technique to create particular times, places and voices, such as David Mason’s account of the Greek, Mexican, Scottish and Italian communities in Southern Colorado, leading up to the 1914 Ludlow Massacre; Ros Barber’s work written from the perspective of Christopher Marlowe; and Weste’s tale of Clodia Metelli and Clodius Pulcher, rebellious siblings in late Republican Rome.

Music also finds a place in these discussions of the verse novel. Christine Evans describes the compositional nature of her writing process:

I don’t have a background in poetry, nor do I consider myself a poet, but I am a trained musician, and I had to rely closely on my ear. It was slow work. I read it aloud to myself, walking around the room. I was listening for the language to sing. (p. 113)

Further, as Cadden has highlighted, the verse novel, much like a play, often works mainly in monologue and dialogue, leaving much of the description to the reader’s imagination: ‘what is missing is the exposition, the description, any external narration’ (2011). Christine Evans confirms this point: ‘it’s similar to playwriting in the sense that it’s architectural: the reader (or actors/director/designers/audience) has a role in its completion’ (p. 115). Similarly, Adam Foulds celebrates the ‘cinematic fluency’ of the form (p. 52).

Beyond the tensions of genre and technique, the discussions of specific writing process were particularly fascinating, rendering some writers more approachable and some almost mystical in their technical prowess. Some of the more humorous and knotty examples of

writing problems include Linda Weste's spreading of the poems comprising her novel upon the floor, only to discover that one of the characters speaking in a late stage of the text had already, in fact, *died*; and Lesley Wheeler's quandary in trying to reveal the race of her character 'Monique' in an appropriate and sensitive way.

Some works exhibit remarkable technical complexity, such as Geoff Page's *Lawrie & Shirley*, comprising rhyming (abcb) tetrameter quatrains; Sarah Corbett's characters in *And She Was*, one of whom speaks in set forms and rhyme schemes, such as the sonnet, and another in open unrhymed forms (in her, words, much like Sylvia Plath); and *Blood and Old Belief* by Paul Hetherington, which utilises a third person narrator in blank verse, but also presents his three central characters using iambic pentameter, iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter voices, respectively. Conversely, highlighting once again the stark differences between writers' perspectives, Brian Castro criticises the more formal modes of verse: 'I was determined not to be restricted by rhyming patterns, mainly because they became an artificial scaffolding upon which the craft is hung out to dry, overly noticeable and insufficiently mute' (p. 77).

Alongside deliberate poetic complexity sits the confessedly accidental nature of a significant number of these novels – the writers of which had not intended to write a verse novel but found themselves doing so regardless and had run with the idea. Adam Foulds 'didn't intend to write a poem at first' (p. 50); rather, he envisioned a collection of interconnected short stories. Philip Schulz, on the other hand, 'was writing a long poem, not a verse novel' (p. 109). As Christine Evans describes, on advice from Erik Ehn to 'follow your writing; don't make your writing follow you' (p. 111), she did exactly that. One cannot help but wonder how many more verse novels we would see if writers allowed themselves to follow the writing.

This 'happy accident' aspect of the writing seems to indicate something inherent about verse as a vehicle for particular kinds of literature and for accessing and presenting different kinds of experience. As noted above, Christine Evans does not consider herself a poet... it seems that there is no prior identification required for the writing of a verse novel, not even that of poet.

Overall, Weste's collection of interviews provides an excellent and approachable introduction to the form for the uninitiated and a kind of deep dive into writing process for those who wish to know a little more about this complicated and ambiguous form. The discussions demonstrate that the open and experimental nature of the verse novel renders it a resurrectionist, threshold form, characterised by ambiguity, risk, bravery, failure and reinvention. Fred D'Aguiar takes a somewhat social perspective on the form, commenting that 'the world needs more verse novels as the world becomes more needy of stillness,

reflection' (p. 5). The verse novel may, perhaps, offer some way of understanding these strange times in which we live.

I wish to finish with Brad Leithauser's call for further exploration of the form and, hopefully, a future proliferation of such liminal, even monstrous texts:

I'd like to see more verse novels, in sufficient profusion that you could begin to watch them cluster, or constellate. As it is, they tend to feel like separate and remote islands, some of them lush and beautiful, some harsh and inhospitable. But it sometimes seems there aren't enough of these islands to create a kind of archipelago. It would be rewarding, I think, to feel that you could travel – paddle – among them. (p. 67)

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Dr Sarah Pearce is a poet, performer and academic from Adelaide, Australia. Her work appears in Aeternum, Outskirts, Meniscus, Writing from Below and TEXT. She has held residencies at Adelaide City Library and FELTspace gallery and performed at Blenheim Festival and Adelaide Fringe Festival. Her writing concerns the body, the self, points of connection, the Gothic and queer identity.



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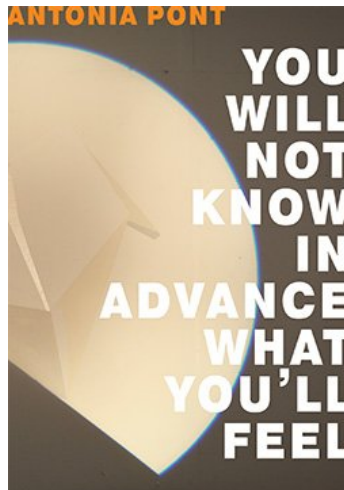
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TEXT review

‘The Genitals of Angels and Octopi’ and ‘A Sonnet Won’t Get You Laid’

review by Gabrielle Everall



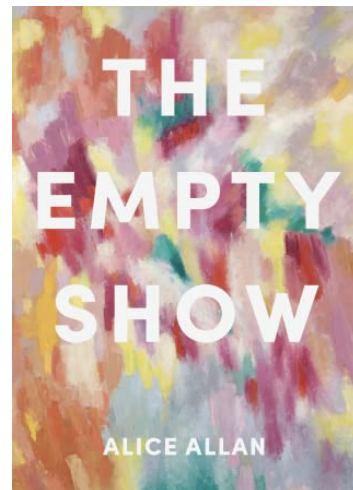
Antonia Pont

You will not know in advance what you'll feel

Rabbit Poetry, Melbourne VIC 2020

9780648534334

Pb 73pp AUD17.00



Alice Allan

The Empty Show

Rabbit Poetry, Melbourne VIC 2020

9780648534327

Pb 65pp AUD17.00

The Genitals of Angels and Octopi

You Will Not Know in Advance What You'll Feel is so true. The beauty of foresight. A vision I do not possess. Is desire the centre? Or is it just an outside of terror and risk taking? Like in ‘of seldom kind’ where ‘fear frills us everywhere’ (p. 4) and there are the ‘sensed terrors / of seldom kind’ (p. 5). The exterior of the corner of an eye.

Our heart lies
within neither of us
within no one.
We orbit around
its independent body
like a close sun
which we
do not catch
but from an eye's corner
throws fruit-red light
across all dishevelled
knowns and resolutions.
(‘blue days’, p. 42)

I am going to write something highly problematic. Which is, that Pont's poetry is hard to understand, is obscure like Sylvia Plath. To compare a woman writer with Sylvia Plath runs the risk of being tokenistic, like something we do to all women writers by virtue of them being women. But I mean it in the highest compliment.

The meanings of Pont's words are nonsynchronous. More than one reading of the text is recommended to fully understand the text.

Pont's form is sparse, lines then lines with lacunas.

Water, the sun and the body are important to Pont, although there is so much more than this. When speaking of embracing the Other in ‘of seldom kind’, Pont also speaks of images of water:

days consist of listening, turning, speaking, of our
wild arms around each other, of our
close voices around the other
then: images of water (p. 4)

The protagonist's fingers are compared to 'brushing...a silver-backed creek', that has glass skin and is unnameable:

my fingers,
prohibitively happy,
as if brushing
the glass skin
of a silver-backed creek.

sensing its course
to trail that thing
we enact more easily
than saying or drinking
—and do not name. (p. 22)

The protagonist's legs are gilled in 'some home' where the 'manager's boy' watched her swim naked, '—mermaids we called it' (p. 25).

The body is 'the nugget seraphic genitals of angels' (p. 11), 'your penis', and an 'underwared' woman that rests her head on a man's belly (p. 13).

In 'cleavage' the female body is a book. Pont writes: 'to fold a body over onto itself/ to bind it like a book / stitched at its spine' (p. 30).

In 'raw body' Pont writes of the love of bodies, their warmth and how they can be penetrated by vampire teeth.

I'm interested in
junctures, the joins between
arms and chest, torso and thigh
where a vampire might ease
smooth polished tips of teeth
cleanly in. (p. 39)

Pont is not afraid to enact fleshy desire:

I've sought the skin within your cheeks, your jaw
in sideview second time we kissed—and *how*
warm bodies are! warmer
than I always knew)& we know(
raw body
as if you'd peel a layer gone
to reveal me
nude being-breathed
to this fact: yes, edgeless sky
(far astronomical depth onto everything)
rests over us. that best light. (p. 39)

A cosmic light rests over their raw bodies.

There is distance and proximity in Pont where she ends 'raw body' with my favourite line in the book: 'I practice the art of my mouth against yours' (p. 40).

Marine life is crucial to this book. Pont describes falling as a 'russet fish/ of a feeling' (p. 22).

The poem 'milk river' reminds me of Kristeva, who writes of milk as being abject (1982, p.2). This poem worried me as Pont writes of bruises but one should never assume the author is being autobiographical. Again, Pont speaks of fish and the body (bruises).

areas of dark white move
like fish beneath
like bruises—rounded, spoken:
submerged garden
pressing to flower after having
flowered. (p. 56)

Pont writes of seals, birds and emotion in 'slow ocean'. The seals clearly aligned with the sense of smell:

seals
—and smell of seals on wooden structures
out to sea I wonder about birds who
plait their necks and mate for life
dancing over and over (this repetition matters)
a dollop of feathers the colour of yolk
dropping corsages of seaweed
and dive bombing
that medium of feelings (p. 60)

'Octofurcation': meaning Octopus/monster/woman.

Is Pont making love to herself, a man, a woman, a bear, a cat, a forest, an octopus or a monster? A monstrous feminine.

Is Pont the octopus or she in the act of becoming with the octopus. In the act of sex: 'I'd be found soundless / on combed sea floor / with you on, around / and monstrously in me' (p. 37).

Then there is the monster as feline: '[T]o thrust your triangular/perfect head' and 'kneading that narrow / and vulnerable place / till you buckle / and flip'. Surely, these are the best sex positions ever written in the English language.

Pont's feminine monster is not a marginalised, male fantasy like those in Ancient Greek mythology. Her Octopus is centre and abjectless. Pont's 'Octofurcation' belies Kristeva. This is not *The Marine Lover of Fredrich Nietzsche* this is *The Marine Lover of Antonia Pont* whose ultimate depth *does* return to the light of day. In 'inoculation' her sea is 'luminous' where soaking your head in the sun is recommended.

our dense sea
new palettes of
impermanence vast
vacant colour the
systoles
 of luminosity
temperatures' paradox

your head. oceans. (p. 8)

Yet Pont's octopus/monster is truly the danger of Nature. Its 'eight keen limbs' (p. 37) can reach to drown her. Her monster can kill you.

A Sonnet Won't Get You Laid

The Empty Show by Alice Allan in terms of 'obscurity' is almost the opposite of Antonia Pont. Alice Allan is less 'obscure' than Pont, more direct and almost conversational. However, on the dustcover Bonny Cassidy writes of Allan's *The Empty Show* that, 'She observes and resists the desire to make logical conclusions' (n.p.). This is particularly true of Allan's visual poems. One of Allan's visual poems references Sylvia Plath who I have described as 'obscure' previously in this review. The visual poem is like a hive and is entitled 'On the threshold of the hive' (p. 12). A third person is watching. There is no Queen Bee. He is gone now there is she.

Love and relationships seem like something to be deconstructed and reconstructed by Allan. Reconstructed sometimes as emptiness. In 'Melbourne Sonnet' a deconstruction of a sonnet is also a deconstruction of love creating something new, contemporary, urban and threatening. A woman on Collins St thinks the protagonist was looking at her when she was looking 'at the laneway behind' her. Allan writes of the woman, 'She put her arm around

my waist and kissed me on my cheek while staring at the man I still call my boyfriend' (p. 3).

In 'Karaoke Queen' the relationship of motherhood is deconstructed. Motherhood is compared to the emptiness of a deleted file that she wants back. In the poem a woman is pregnant and the protagonist does not want the baby. The baby is not the protagonist's, but someone else's where the woman belongs to that 'someone else':

she's pregnant with someone else's baby
calling someone else baby
calling someone a snake (p. 5)

The 'she' in the poem could be the protagonist. Not wanting a baby is compared to not wanting Windows 10. Our technocratic society is criticized in the poem:

she's pregnant and i don't want it
i don't want to live
i don't want Windows 10 (p. 5)

Techno-determinism is also criticised in 'Weather Country', where Australia or Country is also deconstructed. The poem is a parody of and mimics 'My Country' by Dorothy Mackellar. Allan writes, 'I love a data country' and 'I love her Twitter' (p. 49). It also warns about climate change where each stanza is a month by month account of the annual climate statement for 2016. Allan writes, 'a land of minor floodings', 'a land of crop damage' (p. 49), and 'a land of warmest on record' (p. 50). Allan writes, 'Seasonal streamflow forecasts for me!' (p. 49).

Just as Allan deconstructs urban landscapes she also deconstructs the country in 'Nature strip'. The country is just as threatening as the city. Allan writes of misogyny in the country: 'high-vis boys in fashion utes/put your helmet on! SLUT!' (p. 9).

Allan also alerts to the danger and emptiness of gender and race where race is deconstructed in 'A career in poetry':

Thought again about
women and men and
the way none of us
are ever safe
around each other,
about the way
white writers

never get asked
what is the role
of race
in your writing? (p. 37)

Back to the topic of romance or lack thereof. I love 'Dairy-free poem' while sending up being 'dairy-free' (p.20). Allan writes of a romantic attachment to a recipe for dairy-free muffins that she kept as an excuse to see the guy she liked who was dairy intolerant as was his partner.

'Dairy-free poem' also reminds me of 'Crushing on' which appears to be about an unproductive romantic attachment:

Alone in the house, I go to speak to you
Each word seized—distracted

by cramps, my mossy questions
about my time and body.

More pulling at my upper lip,
Moving between rooms, finishing nothing.

Storms turn expensive.
Birthday cards beach themselves.

Years of practice. Slowly learning to stop
treating people like my own limbs. (p. 15)

Allan foregrounds the fictionality of the poem in 'A career in poetry' when she writes:

about the way
no writer
ever gets asked
how much
of this is you
straight up
lying to yourself? (p. 37)

Allan emphasises the self-referential or the lie of the writer also in 'Geraniums' (p.26). Here she is not even sure the street she is walking down is called what she says it is called or if the church nearby is called what she says it is called or even if the woman in the poem was

watering geraniums. She calls the street Lafayette Avenue because she thinks that street is a great name.

If you want to read poetry that acknowledges its lies, is not afraid of the emptiness of relationships, motherhood and Australia in an age of technophilia and climate change Alice Allan's *The Empty Show* is for you.

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Gabrielle Everall is a Masters student at Melbourne University. She has previously completed a PhD at UWA and written two books of poetry. Her most recent book of poetry is the second edition of Dona Juanita and the love of boys published in 2020 by Buon-Cattini Press:
http://buoncattivipress.com/store/p18/Dona_Juanita_and_the_Love_of_Boys.html*. Her second book of poetry is Les Belles Lettres published by Girls on Key Press in 2017.*



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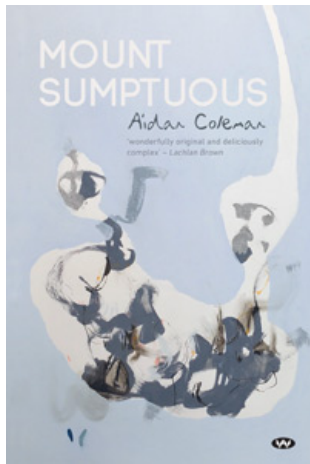
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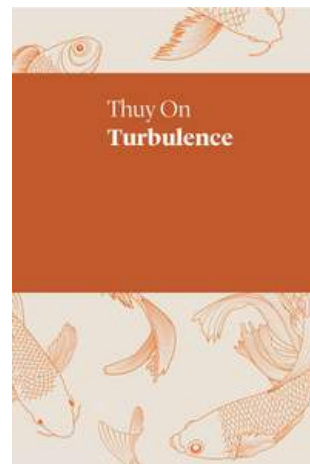
TEXT review

Poetry to penetrate even the cynical heart

review by Carolyn Booth



Aidan Coleman
Mount Sumptuous
Wakefield Press, Mile End SA 2020
ISBN 9781743056646
Pb 72pp AUD19.95



Thuy On
Turbulence
UWA Publishing, Crawley WA 2020
ISBN 9781760801250
Pb 96pp AUD22.99

A life-long struggle with emotional sensitivity has positioned me as a reader who wishes to be enveloped by vulnerable truths and lived experiences. I especially enjoy those works which resonate with my frustratingly atypical amygdala. These works are especially motivating when receiving near-constant, ableist reminders that society does not want ‘my type.’ Aidan Coleman’s *Mount Sumptuous* and Thuy On’s *Turbulence* reach every molecule, leaving me revived in such a way that I can keep up with my brand of activism: building productive and collaborative communities around me.

I often approach a text with the magnificent Doctor Bishop in mind.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange... When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as a part of the larger human experience. (Bishop, 1990, p. 1)

Some of the best texts for me blur the lines between windows and mirrors. The experience of reading Coleman and On's deeply personal work is such that I cannot tell when I am projecting my own experiences into work that may have an entirely different meaning to the authors' intent. Perhaps, when all is said and done, this does not matter.

One known and comforting projection arrives with Coleman's perfect description of the absolute chaos of my brain. They tap into the reality of my developmental disorder and my desperate wish to sometimes be someone other than me:

When your freezer is cluttered
as a library returns chute
you realise the benefits of
cartoon snow. The sugar cubes of igloo bricks
well-storied in their
crisp divisions. (p. 2)

A more universal compliment is in how Coleman takes the contradictions and complications of life and masterfully allows them to exist in the same space and time.

Reading their work, hunched over and lapping up each word while chewing on carrot cake, one pictures a parent with imposter syndrome: a tired soul who wishes they were on the 'thatch pontoon with a bunch of dickheads' of days past (p. 41). A self-proclaimed 'aggro' father (p. 37), Coleman then reminds every aggro parent of the simple, sweet release of a quiet Tim Tam and aromatic tea. God, that sounds wonderful, this parent-reviewer thinks. Yet, one is then reminded how fleeting quiet moments are before the intrusion of often uncontrollable noise invades again. Usually, by some young soul still to learn when shouting is appropriate.

One can also see the frustrating immaturity and shallow nature of society within this work as a metaphor. Just like a screaming child that is not invested in finding a solution, one is reminded of how easy it can be to be consumed and exhausted by all the unhelpful prose on our phones and television sets. One thinks of celebrities and influencers typing rambling

Instagram posts, totally removed from the reality of laypeople, and sometimes without following said posts with meaningful action.

Yet, within memories of carefree days before children, or, while judging the near-constant superficiality and inaction of society, Coleman slips in a warning. What we want are romanticised versions of reality: memories and thoughts that have become distorted, self-indulgent and rosy.

Every child has a dog
bite that grows as the pitches shrink,
like places you remember
from *Monopoly*
too vaguely to pass GO ...
so instead of crowdfunding a heady rescue, we search for clues
in your parents' wardrobe –
find nothing but functional coats. (pp. 42-43)

Not all is lost, however. Coleman sparks hope in the reader in their final words. 'Go, softly on' (p. 49), they say, despite how little light you presently hold. While we continue navigating a world that seems to be getting more chaotic and complex, Coleman's wonderful book of poetry is a timely reminder for all to be gentle with themselves and with those who are still learning (which is often the same person).

As for On's *Turbulence*, I suggest finding a quiet corner in the Uraidla Republic Café, or another cosy and local haunt. Consume each poem without analysis and only emotion, with a side of hot beekeeper's breakfast tea. An accessible and brilliantly vulnerable work, I also suggest you bring tissues.

On's work is hard-hitting if you have ever repeated some iteration of the phrase: 'If I could write you out of my system, I would' (p. 58). While entirely original, many poems are reminiscent of the CBS hit podcast *Alone: A Love Story*.

Not only tears, but inner primal screams were my companions as On generously exposed the pain and longing that accompany loss, love, and sex. For example, one remembers that person who only existed as a 'cameo' (p. 52), yet, was so impossible to let go of:

In both languages
I miss you and
you are missing from me ...
and denial is the pea
beneath mattresses

stacked ceiling high
the keen nub
tearing a hole through
sleep. (p. 59)

At this point, I want to hug my younger self with her overdeveloped breasts and underdeveloped self-esteem. She ignored logic as men crawled over her in secret and remained aloof and ashamed of her in public. Yet, in the emotional space On has provided, ignoring the disharmony ‘between what you feel and what you know’ (63) is not a chastening, but an invitation to heal wounds together.

However, within this healing process do not miss a timely cautioning against Asian stereotyping and fetishism. On is clear, they are neither an ‘oriental tease’, nor are they ‘a lotus flower in fragrant docility’ (p. 72). They do ask for one to ‘learn [their] name’ as they are ‘not a mass of continents’ (p. 80). Thus, one is encouraged to be unashamed of sexuality while being sensitive to the sexual identity and expression of others.

To the reader of this review, I wish I had the space to share every delicious phrase and personal insight I have scribbled onto pale blue post-it notes and stuck to each page of my copy of *Turbulence*. As well as a complete emotional feast, On is triumphant in style, using metaphor and onomatopoeia that is tantalising to the senses and completely satisfying. This reader certainly cannot wait to consume whatever they produce in the future. Likewise, Coleman’s style, with its intertextual inserts, is clever and delightful. With kind consideration, *Mount Sumptuous*’ postscript contains explanations of references that may be unfamiliar to the reader.

Like *Mount Sumptuous*, *Turbulence* finishes in overwhelmingly positive tones:

this ladybird on a leaf
rides the gutters
a pinprick
of red
a fat drop splashes
she flies into dry
seeing her tiny wings
I defy the clouds
and curl
and brace
into the day. (p. 148)

The comfort of vulnerability and masterful weaving of words aside, if one could only take one lesson from reading the work of Coleman and On, I hope it would be to not let poetry remain in the collective unconscious as classroom fodder. Despite all the pain and frustrations of our inner and outer worlds, poetry remains a crucial medium in processing the complexities of sick societies and souls and motivating one to do something about said sickness.

This reviewer suggests we should consume poetry as we would our daily bread, paying attention to the tastes and textures, both pleasant and acrid.

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Carolyn Booth is a student at the University of South Australia. She studies Psychology, but secretly enjoys her literature electives much more. She loves writing for children, singing, and is passionate about composting, mental health and visual literacy.



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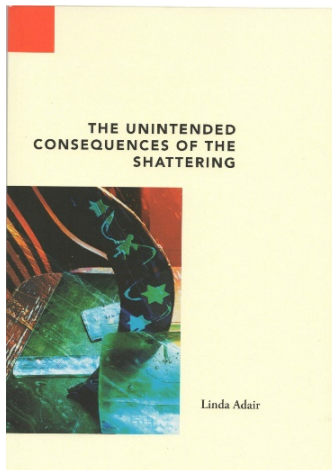
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TEXT review

Attention commits to reckoning

review by Moya Costello



Linda Adair

The Unintended Consequences of the Shattering

Red-bellied Poets/MPU, Melbourne 2020

ISBN 9780648967903

Pb 27pp, AUD25.00

One joyful phenomenon of the twenty-first century has been ‘the wonderful explosion of writing’, the latter phrase used by Jean Bedford (2011, p. 76) in a Study Guide for a university introduction to creative writing subject. This thought was annexed to its opposite: the ‘shrinking’ of publishing. While such shrinkage may refer to major publishing houses, it is not true of the concurrent ‘wonderful explosion’ of independent publishing. For example, there is Melbourne Poets Union in their Red-bellied Poets’ chapbook series, the publishers of the current book under review. And another is Rochford Press, a publishing director of

which is the current poet under review, Linda Adair. These are only two of the several independent publishers that are energetic in English-speaking countries such as Australia, the USA and England. Twitter is alive with such presses – for example, Recent Work Press (Canberra), Copper Canyon Press (USA) and Penteract Press (Britain).

In relation to time and change, once upon a time I thought I knew most names in Australian writing, but now those names blow around me so like so many fluttering leaves. I knew of Adair through her poet-partner Mark Roberts, he of honourably and remarkably sustained, long-term independent publishing (magazine and books) in Australia. But it came as a surprise to me that Adair was a poet. However, having found out in her book's biography note that she has an Honours degree in English lit, that she is a former writer and editor at the Powerhouse Museum, and a freelancer writer for lifestyle and gardening magazines, I have undone my surprise.

The poems in the book are disciplined and carefully writ, where the studied, committed reckoning with varied subject matter consists of lucid, surprise-full and visceral expression. For example, in the opening poem, 'The topography of Us', the poet drives 'west thought the plains' where/when 'reawakened thoughts / leap between stones crouched / like islands of papier-mâché against the torrent of memory' (p. 1). Here, the sparky adjective, action verbs, inventive simile, vivid noun and carefully chosen line breaks force a slowing down of reading, so that attention commits to reckoning of meaning via the sharp sensuousness of language's capacious tools.

In the last few years, I have found myself unavailable as a reader of many Australian collections. But the acute judgement evident in the poems in this collection means that just in the possession of this book I can feel/experience the firmness poetry.

Adair noticeably sustains discipline through the 24 poems whose content shifts across autobiography/memoir, culture, politics and place including incorporation of the other-than-human.

Perhaps one of Adair's finest poems in this collection is 'The Light Far from the Hill' about her daughter; perhaps it is among the best poems ever written from mother to daughter. The poem covers birth and character development, family, homeland/s and journeying farther afield.

Your framed photo of our Irish odyssey sits on my desk.
We are together at last....
smiling, frozen in the winter sun of St Stephen's Green,
site of fierce gun battles waged for independence.
There you uttered *it feels like we've come home*. (pp. 16-17)

This brief extract from the 60-line poem probably does not convey the experience of its overall subtle weightiness derived from imagery and the shifts through time, place, people, and affect. But even here you can tell Adair's smart choices such as the selection of a place known for a war of independence, resonating with children growing up and away, yet, still, their acknowledgement of the not-easily-dismissed influences of homeland.

As a horticulturalist and landscape designer, Adair is cognisant of the other-than-human parallel life forces with our (human) own. In '7.7.2017 – I.M. Rae Desmond Jones', mourners gather 'under the canopy of *Agonis Flexuosa*' (p. 21). *Agon* can mean cluster, referring to flower/fruit, and people, but also to exercise and compete in the sense of pain and struggle. The etymology of *flux* is flow, and *flus* includes bleeding. Resonances with life–death are embedded: *Agonis Flexuosa* has a weeping habit.

The Unintended Consequences is a significant publication in the sense that it is by a mature, new, female poet from an independent press. All praise, then, to such independent presses: they tell you what is achievable outside the circumscription and predictability of corporations.

I would love to have overheard conversations about their poetry and poetry in general between Adair and Roberts, another terrific poet whose poems have a visceral effect on the body: What were the rhythms of agreement in those conversations, the moments of contestation?

Anne Casey, poet, gave a luminous launch speech for Adair, stating that 'this iridescent debut chapbook ... will arrest you' (2020). At a time of divided attention, this is what you want: to see through much opacity.

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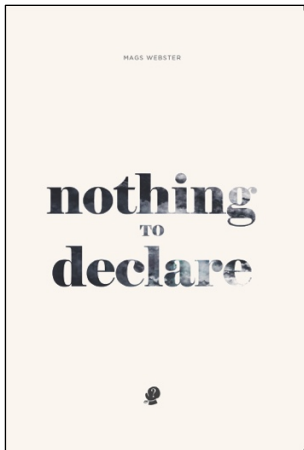
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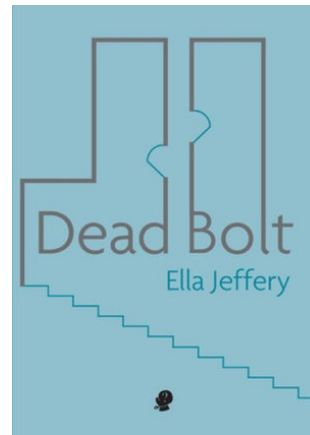
TEXT review

You can live on things like this

review by Dominic Symes



Mags Webster
Nothing to Declare
Puncher and Wattmann, Waratah NSW
2020
ISBN 9781925780987
Pb 90pp AUD 25.00



Ella Jeffery
Dead Bolt
Puncher and Wattmann, Waratah NSW
2020
ISBN 9781925780710
Pb 114pp AUD 25.00

As anyone who has accidentally found themselves watching an episode of *Border Security* can attest, when a passenger says they have ‘nothing to declare’ it is best to assume otherwise. While the title of this recent collection by Mags Webster downplays the contents, the discerning reader (like the dutiful customs official) is rewarded for carefully unpacking the many references; the souvenirs collected upon the poet’s physical and literary travels.

Published last year by Puncher and Wattman, *Nothing to Declare* spans registers and continents. Yet, grouped into five distinct sections there is an order to the poems which suggests careful arrangement. The effect of this layout, matched to support the overarching impact of Webster's poetry is the productive tension between sensuality and a restraint that borrows from a minimalist, forensic preoccupation to locate the most effective word or phrase.

Disregarding the understatement of the title, there is little which is discreet about the use of language. Some poems in the collection are so full of passion they feel like they should be read over a sink, such is the language which oozes and drips like a perfectly ripe stone fruit: a peach, or a nectarine. In the poem 'Autopsy', which begins, 'I do not trust the fruit / she brought— that woman,' the speaker's body, which could as easily stand for the poetry itself, is examined and brought to life through attention; by 'surgeon's hands / and a keen forensic eye' (p. 32). The many grafts and cuts throughout the book are so deft that they suggest an almost Frankenstein-esque project.

Returning to literary forebears and retelling stories through a feminist lens, Webster frequently conjures the language of resurrection to bring these literary bodies back to life. There is 'Metabolising Heathcliff' (p. 8), and 'Digging up Persephone' (p. 12), as well as, 'Jessie from the Golden Shovel' (p. 14), which splices lines from the Gwendolyn Brooks' poem into its line endings. 'Bonnard Beauty Reveals All' (p. 4) and 'Mrs. Batman, M.D, Msc, Psych.D' (p. 16) are examples of this approach to source material that envisions the creative process as an imitation of and comment on existing texts. The poems display a critical aspect, but adroitly circumvent the sterility of a mortician's dissection. Instead, these poems breathe. Perhaps more interestingly than the fact that many of these returns focus on female protagonists, but that most redress female characters created by female authors and poets. Where female subjects are considered by male authors – Nabokov's *Lolita* (from 'Dolores' (p. 7) Bonnard's unnamed 'Beauty' – the male gaze is sent up. Webster creates a lineage of female literature, updating and refocusing the female gaze on female characters – claiming and reinstating what was missed the first time around on her return.

The notion of returning in *Nothing to Declare*, reminds me of a Ricky Gervais skit about Oscar Wilde failing to deliver his famous *bon mot* the first time he came to America. He experiences a moment of *esprit d'escalier* and must wait until his second Atlantic crossing (which is foiled by an inattentive customs officer, to whom Gervais suggests that Wilde, desperate to deliver the quip, asks impatiently if he is going to be asked whether he has anything to declare or not). The point is, the response suggests a return, a do-over, an opportunity to repeat or relive with renewed sense of purpose.

Pleasures are presented with the joy and seriousness of new discovery. The poem 'Scan' begins:

My body is
 an amalgam of language
 on the page
 of the hospital bed (p. 47)

Again, the concept of gaze and perception is problematised, recalling an earlier couplet from ‘self-portrait’, ‘how good does / reflection taste?’ (p. 44). In these poems, the pleasure-seeking body is abruptly viewed in the relief of failure and decay. The innocuous left hand is pegged for its otherness in ‘Sinister’, and its ‘plot’ to ‘usurp / its dextrous, favoured / twin’, as the lines cleverly trail away from the left margin (p. 49). The project of these poems is to find something new in the already considered, by using language to shift focus and redirect our attention. Like Keats said in ‘Endymion’, ‘A thing of beauty is a joy for ever’, but in a culture that is shifting so fast, these poems enact a rediscovery of joy within already beautiful things and highlight beauty that might not have been perceived the first time around, or the joy able to be accessed in the acknowledgement of decay.

The passage of time which passes from an initial moment to the return is the subject of the poem ‘Late harvest wine’, where potential hangs ‘heavy with autumnal fruit’ (p. 30) before an acknowledgement that the ‘fruit will husk and shrivel’ (p. 31). This acceptance of time inevitably passing is suggested as a conclusion the speaker of the poem is willing to swallow as the poem ends with the line, in iambic pentameter for additional resonance: ‘let’s raise a glass of ‘too late’ harvest wine’ (p. 31).

Where Webster is reawakening the past, Ella Jeffery in *Dead Bolt*, also from Puncher and Wattmann, is concerned with predicting the immediate future. ‘I can predict the future’, begins the poem ‘Meteorology’, before quipping with characteristic deadpan, ‘but only a little’ (p. 43).

Some of the best moments in Jeffery’s book are delivered with this same quickness. The poem ‘Alla Prima’ (p. 36) references a style of painting which applies wet paint to a still wet canvas. The style is direct and leaves no room for error. It highlights the gesture of the painter and suggests something magical about the moment in which the piece was made. Equally, Jeffery’s poems happen in situ, often referencing a location or a moment in time.

Regarding place, this collection shifts from suburban Australia to Shanghai and back again. The use of Chinese place names amongst the otherwise colloquial language, sometimes causes the reader to stop and look up from their map for a second to get their bearings: it wasn’t so long ago we were killing spiders with the poem’s speaker in suburbia. Yet, in amongst all of this drift, there is the constant of Jeffery’s clear, and brilliant voice.

‘A History of Blue’ is a remarkable poem for the way it tessellates and offers variation on a theme. The ‘[d]rowsy blue of my teetotal grandfather’s tattoo’, rubs against an aerial view of ‘Stradbroke Island / in shades of blue ringed octopus’ (p. 33). In a lesser poem by a lesser poet, these two images might seem too harsh juxtapositions between the micro and the macro, yet here, these images are counterpointed by hybrid images, ‘while the Pacific lilts like aquarium plastic’, and ‘the sky’s huge blue hand pressed / against the windows’ (p. 31). From the poem’s first line, ‘Brainscan blue of the horizon’s edge / before dawn’, each image fits like a tile in a mosaic and sustains the conceit of the poem’s title without ever feeling overwrought (p. 31). The poem does what it says it will, yet when the historical recount we are promised arrives it is a deeply personal, non-objective history that again, like the act of painting *alla prima*, highlights the compositional skill of the artist behind it: confirming that this is not just a director’s assortment of shots to progress the narrative, but an auteur’s unique arrangement.

The examination of experience present in the work of Elizabeth Bishop, like that in the work of Robert Lowell and John Berryman, gives a sense of a poet situated amongst real images occurring in the world. While being selections from real life, the images of Jefferey’s, like these poets of yesteryear, retain their potency as they are beset and arranged within the scheme of the poem. Berryman’s poem ‘The Dispossessed’ describes being, ‘in empty houses where old things take place’ (p. 26), and it is the images, names and places lifted from real life which generate a similar sense of foreboding domesticity that is sustained throughout *Dead Bolt*.

To return to the use of place names, Derrida described a process by which naming a thing through a signature or date destroys the thing by highlighting the futility of attempting to record an impossible moment (1979). In other words, a name is like a blackhole, sucking you through and spitting you out the other side. When a poet uses a name, they strip it of its objectivity and endow it with subjective resonances. As readers, we approach a named object or place with all of the associations we have brought to it. For that reason, using a place name in a poem rarely has the direct effect of communicating the place, but rather obfuscating and suspending comprehension of that place. It means that for all the straightforward language in *Dead Bolt*, there is always a more personal resonance hiding, ‘in the old houses [of language] where old things take place.’

Writing about the poetry of Hannah Sullivan in the *New York Times*, Dwight Garner critiques a poem in which Sullivan describes nothing more than what she sees in an airport. It’s not escapism, he suggests, but rather the nourishment available from appreciating what the tangible, banal world around us provides: how this can be a ‘comfort’ too (2020). ‘You can live on little things like this’, he writes, ‘[y]ou follow where this writer leads you’ (2020). ‘Ways to Suffer’ is funny and harrowing, deriving much of its gravitas from listing these

‘little things’ (p. 55). When Jeffery suggests how one could, ‘swim at Bondi; get an eye / infection at Buñol; accept a glass of baijiu’, you do accept, you do ‘follow’ (p. 55).

While I’ve commented already on the expert pacing and mosaic-like balance of ‘A History of Blue’, it is worth mentioning how well the poems are arranged to provide an overall aesthetic coherence to the book, which is not always easy to do in a first collection – which typically will read like a Greatest Hits (...up until this point). Instead, themes and names recur: Nietzsche, the painting of Jan Van Eyck and Scott Cam, like Golden Orb spiders they are there one minute, and just when you think you’re rid of them, they’re back, weaving their webs throughout the poems.

With equal dexterity and composure, Jeffery writes beautiful love poems without straying into the territory of the cliché. ‘The Universal is a fantasy’, writes Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda (2015), and the pleasure in reading *Dead Bolt* is finding the moments where, like the place names, a cliché or common domestic images delivers you to something more personal and lasting. One such image among many in ‘Backcountry’ is, ‘My favourite wine glasses / each spent their last seconds an inch / from the back of his wrist’ (p. 45).

No one should be surprised that *Nothing to Declare* and *Dead Bolt*, two of the best collections of poetry released last year, were written by female-identifying poets, who both remain connected to and evoke through their poetry, time spent on the Asian continent. Both books seem like timely assertions against what a lot of male-identifying poets wrote in the last century with an eye to Europe, which upon reflection seem outdated and lacking imagination. While the books are quite different in their aims, in how they approach the craft of writing, the poets both evidence an ability to place themselves within existing grand-narratives and provide crystalline insights into that lived experience.

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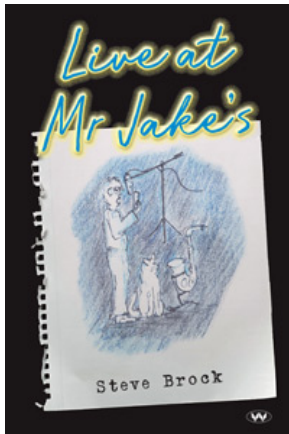
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TEXT review

Poetry & Barthes' *Camera Lucida*: Going 'Live' with Steve Brock

review by Dominic Symes



Steve Brock

Live at Mr Jake's

Wakefield Press Adelaide 2020

ISBN 9781743057100

Pb 104pp AUD 19.95

If poetry could be said to be concerned with the presentation of images expressed through language, then one of the central tasks of the poet is to identify those images which may successfully reach us despite the chaos and banality of our lives. Steve Brock's latest book of poetry, *Live at Mr Jakes* is a book of quiet revelation, of simple pleasures and of trying to grasp that which exists at the edge of language's reach while maintaining a steady hand.

Brock looks to foreign places for inspiration, reminding us of a pre-pandemic life punctuated by travel which exposed us to the pleasures of complete cultural immersion.

The first section of the book takes place in Paris, in Barcelona, and in California, before retreating to normal life for the rest of the book, with the occasional travel moment resurfacing to contrast the surroundings. He also finds this inspiration in foreign languages (his fluency is in Spanish) experienced both abroad and through a close-knit community of Spanish-speaking Chilean ex-pats who live in Brock's native Adelaide, including the poets Juan Garrido-Salgado and Sergio Holas who are both named checked in the book. Despite the contrasts in location and language, the pace of the poetry, how each stanza relies upon a sentence being broken up into smaller breath lines, remains consistent and pays homage to these South American connections and influences.

Between the ecstasy of freedom and the routine of the everyday there are the images the speaker offers to us as evidence of their role as the poet; the centre around which the dramatic and undramatic events of the book unfold. In his book on photography *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes terms *punctum* as a way of describing the novel characteristics of an image that allow the content to surpass its materiality and reach through the image to us (1980). Brock's poetry is a window into the way he experiences the world, as the images and scenarios presented in the poems convey to us the inherent novelty which appealed to him, summoned him to the page and are the same which he is keen to preserve in the poem. That Barthes is writing about the medium of photography is particularly pertinent to how *punctum* serves as a way to understand Brock's collection, as it foregrounds the role of the person behind the camera by evaluating their vision against the automatic properties of the documenting mechanism; in another way, this comparison highlights two metrics by which photography and these poems can be evaluated: on the selection of the image, and on the effectiveness of language used to capture and preserve it. The camera's ability to do the 'work' of capturing the image and representing it faithfully, also leaves it open to surprise, failure, missed opportunities, poorly framed figures and blurriness, in contradistinction to painting where every figure is meticulously composed with an eye to form, ratio and compositional balance. This is not to say that all painting is like this (certainly non-figurative painting is not), nor that photography cannot be composed the way a painting is, but rather to highlight the effect of moments captured in *Live at Mr Jakes* as something closely akin to street photography – for its succinctness, its lack of overbearing subjectivity, and its situatedness in the available 'live' imagery of everyday things.

Like a biathlon competitor making their way into the transition zone, Brock's poetry is concerned with accuracy; the kind which results from slowing one's breathing down to a manageable rhythm before pulling the trigger to shoot at the targets. There is a coolness to this poetry, not born out of egotism, nor detachment, but generated by allowing the language to remain purposeful without getting swept away in the subject matter – relying, as it were on the 'automatic' properties of the camera to represent. This coolness could equally be described as minimalism, the way a jacket worn often becomes a statement and

synonymous with one's style. Yet in this example, it is possible to wonder whether the jacket is the expression of an idea (a strongly held belief pertaining to style) or the result of an empty closet. It does not matter really, because doing one thing and one thing well is the essence of cool.

With that said, many of the poems tend to end in a similar way; arriving unhurriedly at a moment of levity or clarity with the promise of a new world where that piece of captured experience will endure. It is because the poems do not use language in a way which defamiliarizes or cause the reader to stop and consider words or syntax that the endings feel more essential: as if the information communicated clearly and purposefully will deliver the reader to a worthwhile end, the way a photograph aims at representing a moment accurately so that the viewer might make their mind up about what they are seeing.

In 'New Year's Eve 2010', a poem which begins with a story about taking psychotropic drugs in South America in the early 90s where the poet describes, 'I had access / to an infinite array of images / & travelled through my mind' (p. 45), the poem ends on a more subdued note at the time of the poem's composition where there is a conspicuous lack of fireworks:

in 2010
I was happy
to sip Pisco
on ice
without the need
for fireworks. (p. 47)

The conclusion of the poem is direct: happy without the mess of infinity, but focused on the immediate pleasures to hand as it resolves on the literal and metaphoric double meaning of 'fireworks' (p. 47). Like Barthes describes, sometimes the arrangement of a photographed image reveals *studium* rather than *punctum*, with *studium* representing the recognisable tropes and symbols we are conditioned to understand already (1980). The language of photography is the language of *studium*, where we read the surprise in an image of an open mouth, or the loneliness expressed by an empty chair. A lot of poems seemed to be loitering outside of these metaphors, but instead of busting the door down with a risky, *punctum*-aiming take on the subject, or leaning in to the available and potentially obvious clichés, some poems end up missing opportunities for both *studium* and *punctum*. The site of this evaluation often takes place in the poem's final lines, as the clarity of expression pulls the reader down the page without impediment.

Some of the poems in Section Three, like 'New Year's Eve 2010' really hit the target through the intelligent wrangling of *studium* in their final lines, 'Taxi Driver' for example, where a receipt is folded in the final line 'like a prayer / for real economics' (p. 54), or 'Personality Test' which ends saying, 'apparently they failed to pick up / he's a dickhead' (p. 61). Others in this section describe scenarios that are interesting, and well described, but lack the novelty of *punctum* or the familiarity of *studium*, like, 'A Blessing', 'American Homo' or 'Glass', where the fidelity to reporting and presenting moments clearly delimits the possibility for that well-worn or novel payoff. The adherence to mood takes precedent over lining up a sharp contrast. Yet, doing one thing and doing that thing well is still as cool as it was a paragraph ago and there are plenty of examples where that jacket, the same one worn throughout, starts to appear like a truly enviable indicator of style. The final three poems in the collection, 'Alfajor', 'Zucchini Flowers' and 'The way she brushes her hair', are examples of where form and content are expertly matched.

The poem 'Alfajor', quoted in full below, is the best indication of how the clarity of expression and the allusion to foreign influence is used to present something novel through the otherwise automatic and banal:

We eat alfajores
and membrillo
from Argentina
bought in Melbourne.
There's no translation
for alfajor.
You'll find dulce de leche
inside.
There's no real translation for that
either
although caramel comes close.
The alfajor is round
with biscuit on the outside.
Individually wrapped
they taste as good
as the word alfajor.
Pronounce the j like an h
as though your mouth is full
of sweetness. (p. 93)

Another of Barthes' concepts is *materia prima*, which suggests the ability for a borrowed image to retain its full power when inserted into a different context (1985). For a painter it is the ability to create enough space around a line on a canvas for that new line to be a

celebration of the colour itself. In this way Brock knows when to get out of the way of a foreign word and allow the power inherent in it to take centre stage. What could be more accurate than the sentence, 'The alfajor is round / with biscuit on the outside' (p. 93)? The use of English is grasped tightly to retain its functionality, but the foreign words are highlighted by this contrast. Rightfully, the word 'alfajor' sparkles like a jewel beset in this otherwise straightforward sentence.

A similar approach to preserving the beautiful in Australian English would arrive somewhere on the outskirts of Mark Tredinnick or Les Murray's poetry, where a mystical hue is generated through a veneration of the language of the bush. Oleander, Sassafras, Goyder's line – there is a romanticism in our associations with these uncommon and uncommonly beautiful words which these poets understand and to which we as readers are drawn.

One brilliant conceit in this book is the mouthfeel that Brock describes in 'Alfajor'. The sound, the way the word looks and Brock's link to how good it feels in your mouth shows how cleverly he is able to find (rather than imagine) connections and still assert himself as the composer of these images: surpassing *stadium* and providing real, payoff inducing *punctum*.

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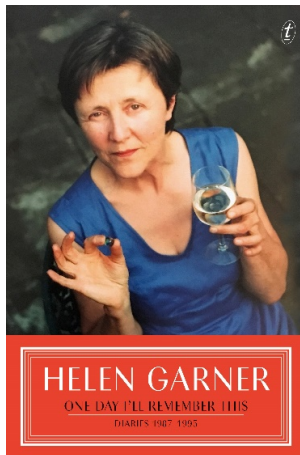
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TEXT review

Practical Circumstance

review by Moya Costello



Helen Garner

One Day I'll Remember This: Diaries 1987–1995

The Text Publishing company, Melbourne 2020

ISBN 9781922330277

Hb 320pp, AUD29.99

Much before I read this second volume of Helen Garner's diaries, I already thought of it as her Murray-Bail period.

She records her first meeting with Bail in 1986, at the end of the first volume, *Yellow Notebook: Diaries volume 1 1978–1987* (Costello 2020). In this second volume, in 1987, V (Murray Bail) is recorded on the first page: 'V's quite a funny bloke, really. His body is neglected' (p. 1). A photographic portrait of Bail in the National Library of Australia, taken by Elizabeth Gillman in 1988, is 'strikingly intimate, suave, darkly handsome' (Costello

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2017a, p. 95). A 1981 painted portrait by Fred Williams is of 'a seemingly would-be style-icon, a weed-like, even nerdish figure' (Costello 2017a, p. 94). In 2008, Susan Wyndham ac[c]u[ra]tely summarised Bail as a combination of 'urban dude and downcast Eeyore'.

The Garner-Bail relationship does dominate this second volume. But not until I read on through it (Of course!) did I realise what an extraordinary volume it is. It delivers again an affecting and immersive performance of Garner's writerly skills of observation and expression. Bail himself comments on these, but surprisingly asks does she have ideas, argument? She responds revealingly: '[not] in the abstract. Only when something arises out of a practical circumstance' (p. 76).

This volume also tracks important phenomena in Australian literature, as well as in national and international politics: the genesis, production and/or reaction to Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino*, *The First Stone*, films *Two Friends* and *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, and Bail's *Homesickness*, *Holden Performance*, *Eucalyptus* and *Longhand*; snippets from a 1987 Australian writers' tour in the USA, which included publisher Michael Heyward and poet Laurie Duggan; writing collegiality with Bail, David Malouf (X), Drusilla Modjeska (E), Tim Winton (J) and Hilary McPhee (Y), even possibly Robyn Davidson as 'the adventurous beauty' (63) (her correspondence is in the Bail archive); the sale of McPhee Gribble to Penguin; Paul Keating becoming Prime Minister in 1991, the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the dismantling of the Berlin wall in 1989, the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, and the changing climate.

Cosmo Cosmolino, published in 1992, is forming in both volumes of the diary (Costello 2020): 'I want to write a novel about the born-again' (p. 18); '[g]ot to get this angel story finished ... I don't 'know' what I want to 'say'. I'm finding out as I go' (p. 179). She refers to the Mighty Force on several occasions: that which stalks her and Janet, the protagonist of *Cosmo*.

The First Stone is published in the last year of these diaries. There's not a great deal of referencing to it, though what there is smarts. (Perhaps there might be more of the fallout in a potential third diary volume, but for a majestic coverage of *The First Stone* debate, I'd recommend Bernadette Brennan's 2017 book *A Writing Life, Helen Garner and Her Work*: an orchestrated, fairhanded account (Costello 2017b).)

Garner labours at the screenplay *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, to be directed by Gillian Armstrong, 'with groans, tears and blank spots' (p. 39), but later she notes the 'speed and force of the thing's arrival, when it comes' (p. 44). She comments on the writing of pieces about a morgue and ballet classes that will later be collected in her creative nonfiction.

She laughs at Bail's reading to her of parts of what I take to be *Holden's Performance*: 'very funny. Dry, completely *competent*, full of fancies' (p. 4). But later I think she refers to the same novel as 'quite mystifying – don't know what the hell he is doing in it – much less 'funny' than the earlier one [which I understand to be *Homesickness*]' (p. 34). He also shows Garner an excerpt from his notebooks (to be published as *Longhand*): 'his sharp eye, everything fresh, tough and surprising – and the ideas for his weird stories forming in the gaps' (p. 144). Bail says of his notebooks' authorial voice: 'severe, pompous, humourless' (p. 153). He comes to her, too, with the genesis of *Eucalyptus* 'about an Australian man who ... planted a stand of eucalypts', but lost the metal labels to the war effort and then had to find out their names (pp. 223-224).

David Malouf (Z) is surprisingly vitriolic about academic biographers who write 'safe in a university' (p. 75) while having no clue as to the risks involved in writers' lives and works; and Bail also 'reports' Malouf's 'outburst' against 'women's writing' with its 'domestic nuances' which he dislikes' (p. 155).

When Garner comes to Sydney to be with Bail, Drusilla Modjeska offers her a room in her Enmore house. Modjeska's (2016) *Second Half First* tracks her shared writerly space with Garner. Modjeska is also a writerly colleague of Bail. While Garner tracks Bail's various attendances at or watching television for boxing, Modjeska (n.d.) wrote to Bail: 'I read your Fenech ... Never did I think such a thing could happen: one absorbed in boxing! You made it wonderfully human ... And of course I liked the you-ness of it'.

Tim Winton (J) reads a version of 'The Vigil' for Garner. Hilary McPhee (Y) is a tough editor, 'thorough yet somehow painless ... exhilarating' (p. 215).

As is usual for Garner, there is much about place, and most about Melbourne and Sydney. Garner's and Bail's opposing reactions to each other's home city are not an insignificant disruptive factor in their relationship. From the literary tour to the USA, there are responses to several American cities – for example, at Stanford, as they drove in the heat through a small Eucalypt forest, 'the smell [was] ... intoxicating' making Garner homesick ('I hung out the window with a lump in my throat' (p. 62)).

Garner's glorious love for her daughter (M) continues. Also glorious, too, are her appreciation of the fine labour of writing, from sentence to structure, from gritting teeth to slogging on at a desk; continuing friendships; and her love of music.

This second volume of diaries is like reading a mystery or adventure or any genre where, as a reader, you're desperate to find out what happens next. For the Garner-Bail marriage officially ends in 1998, three years after this second volume ends, although both of them, as well as the reader, can see it coming: there's love and tenderness and 'a force field of

interest' (p. 116) between the two, but also a gnashing of teeth. The reading of the deterioration of the relationship is also like being in a whirlpool, a cauldron: there is so much passion and intensity. Bail comes to speak to her while she is cleaning the bathroom, and previously he had admitted to never cleaning a lavatory (pp. 241-242). He advises her to stop writing about the 1970s, but Garner says that reading him feels like being in the 1950s. It's possibly Bail who admits to never making a salad, and he invalidates his vote by writing a complaint on it against compulsory voting. (Yet while in England some years earlier, he sent a letter to Rodney Hall saying 'How could I return to Australia if the mediocre Libs are in?' (Bail n.d.)) But he does ride a bicycle and skin a rabbit.

Bail showed Garner a photo of his father of whom Garner writes: 'his face ... hard, clamped, full of some terrible inward-turned power – like someone who could have died ... of bottled-up emotion' (p. 93). In portraits, Bail is usually unsmiling and closed-lipped: 'a man of few but sharp words. (Oh, but you want those words, and you don't want those words to be sharp with you.)' (Costello, 2017a, p. 95).

This year, Bail is 80 and Garner 79. The second volume of Garner's diaries was written primarily when both were in their late forties. In 2020, in her lockdown journal, Garner was working 'seven hours at a stretch' (n.p.). Text Publishing (n.d.) has announced a new book from Bail in 2021: *He..* The cover image quotes Bail writing that, at aged twelve, he 'already has a certain earnestness, the solemnity, trying to comprehend the incomprehensible'. Published in 2005, Bail's *Notebooks* contain some acerbic comments that, I suspect, refer to Garner (unnamed).

What I assume to be Garner's letters to Bail in his archive require permission to read until 20 years after his death. All of Garner's archive requires permission, some of it not accessible at all for a few years. Nevertheless, given what is currently available outside the archived letters, revelations continue – if not unabashedly, then surely tempered by self-examination and evidence-based argument.

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TEXT review

More than ice and snow

review by Simon-Peter Telford



Reinhard Hennig, Anna-Karin Jonasson, Peter Degerman (eds)
Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment
Lexington Books 2018
ISBN 978-1-4985-6190-7
Hb 258pp AUD145.00

Like the blurring of individual snowflakes in a blizzard, *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment* blends together a mix of literature, film and other media in an investigation into the culture of Nordic nature. Peeling off the sometimes-protective labels of green-friendly nations with eco-policies and images of pristine vistas, *Nordic Narratives* explores how and why these cultural narratives are formed, and if they hold true. It is clear that the goals of this book are to shine a light onto ecocriticism and environmental humanities in the Nordic sphere, with an important emphasis on the post-colonial north and Anglocentrism.

Nordic Narratives is structured around three sub-themes: 'Nordic Anthropocene narratives; language, aesthetics, and the non-human in Nordic environments; and environmental justice

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and the postcolonial North' (p. 11). As such, in this review I will be selecting a chapter of each theme to expound upon. There is a short introduction within the volume which acts as a hypodermic injection of definitions and explanations. Concepts such as the Anthropocene and the issues that stem from it, literary subjects mentioned earlier in this review and Scandinavian studies are given a brief grounding that allows the reader to engage in the topics covered within.

As with most short introductions to subjects as complex as the Anthropocene, there is little engagement with alternative thoughts besides an acknowledgement. The term Anthropocene, for example, is contested by some such as Jason Moore, who uses the label Capitalocene, believing economic philosophy to be the driving force (2017), or Donna Haraway's Chthulucene for whom the name describes the vast interconnected and tentacular concepts of Earth and its representations throughout cultures and time (2015). This is recognised as a minor disagreement which reaches little further than labels, however those who compete for an alternative label would not agree, rather that this disagreement represents whole changes in approaching and understanding the world in which we live. As mentioned, however, the concept of the Anthropocene is a complex one that stretches across the sciences and humanities, and as such *Nordic Narratives* facilitates the reader to engage with the subjects within the scope of their concern.

With the perceived high standards of environmental consciousness Nordic countries possess on the world stage it would have been easy to write a book highlighting their narratives of nature as the means in which said standards have come about. *Nordic Narratives* takes a bold stance, with the opening chapter expressing how narratives are creating a false sense of security within Scandinavia in particular. Lauren E. LaFauci explains:

Prevailing negative Anthropocene stories from outside of Scandinavia often contrastingly position Sweden and Norway as exceptional, almost utopic, places immune from such human-induced environmental catastrophes. This position owes more to cultural imaginaries that ignore the hard truths of our planetary crisis: namely, that at the extreme northern and southern halves of the planet, warming and its associated effects are accelerating, making these regions extremely unstable and unsafe. (p. 33)

The volume is unapologetically Nordic, with the texts, film and other media covered consisting of a fair size of Finnish and other particular languages. While this is, of course, to be expected it does raise concerns for the world-wide reader. A question could be asked, how relevant or informative is this book outside of Nordic studies? The answer will vary. The authors have achieved great success in melding popular theories and figurehead thinkers with the localised material, and in this way, it is not only interesting to read, for the academic reader it also provides examples on how one may do so themselves when writing on their own locality. From my own personal perspective, as a PhD candidate, whose area of work can be found amongst literary responses to the Anthropocene, I found the volume to be engaging and helpful in taking previous knowledge into new spaces. As the Anthropocene is a planetary wide subject, to read how narratives from the other side of the planet engage with the concept was intriguing. This does come with a caveat. There are times when the text is difficult to penetrate.

Hanna Samola's chapter *Human-Plant Encounters in Contemporary Finnish-language Dystopian Fiction* is an example of the volumes content that may seem niche and unrelatable, at first. I had not read any of the texts that were to be analysed for the way in which plants were used within the narratives. I also had no knowledge on specific Finnish plants. When reading the title for this chapter my thoughts were that it would be interesting, no doubt, but I was concerned with how much I could take away. Samola shares that 'plants have a significant role in contemporary Finnish-language dystopias that form the material of this chapter. In these novels, human characters discuss their relation to plants, intentionality and intelligence among plants, or the disappearance of plant species' (p. 137). The chapter continues with an explanation on plants within dystopian narratives including references to Atwood and Huxley and more. This is a common thread throughout *Nordic Narratives*, the balance of general readership and more mainstream knowledge blending with Nordic specifics. By the end of the chapter, posthumanism, grief, the human/nature relationship, and more is examined in relation to the novels analysed. I still could not help, however, feeling that I was missing some deeper understanding, without having read the texts.

'Scandinavian Wilderness and Violence', a chapter by Kari Haarder Ekman focuses on non-fiction writing from the early tourist expansions into northern 'wilderness' within Scandinavia. The interactions between the nomadic Sami people and the industrialised southerners reads as an interesting allegory for the way in which humanity views nature. The relationship between the way the Sami are viewed as nature, and part of the wilderness brings up intriguing points of how colonisation instructs viewpoints. As is referenced in the chapter, wilderness is not truly a 'pure' landscape (if the lack of humanity is pure, what does that make humanity?) but rather a uniquely human perspective that depends on cultural understandings and uses for the environment (p. 192). For the Sami, the cities and trains are a wilderness, and for the tourists, the great mountains, that are a place of home for the Sami, are a wilderness.

Ekman uses an excerpt from a writer of the early 20th century to describe how a Sami herdsman has received news that he must suddenly pay fees for a piece of land that the herdsman's reindeer have gathered on for centuries. The herdsman states 'The law is against us, so there is nothing to be done. We're foreigners, we are! We haven't any rights, we only wander over a world that isn't ours any longer!' (p. 193) Here we see the narratives of nature between differing human groups colliding. Some would say that the land belonged to the Sami as it has traditionally, others would say that the governing bodies of the nations should decide. Taking a further approach, one that may be necessary if humanity and the planet as we know it is to survive the Anthropocene, we may need to question the idea of owning land, as a whole. The chapter also covers ideas on slow-violence, a concept Rob Nixon uses to explain the incremental and long-acting damages to particularly vulnerable people through environmental damage (p. 196). Ekman uses the Scampi as an example of how the intersections of power, people, and the environment are built through the narratives we share.

As Timothy Morton declares, the era we now find ourselves in 'makes necessary a searching revaluation of philosophy, politics, and art' (2016, p. 174). *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment* presents how Nordic countries and people have built their ideas on nature, and the human/nature relationship through narratives of literature, film and other media. The volume mixes local examples with theories of eco-criticism and the

Anthropocene to investigate and challenge how we, as humans, have forged these narratives and how this may change in the future.

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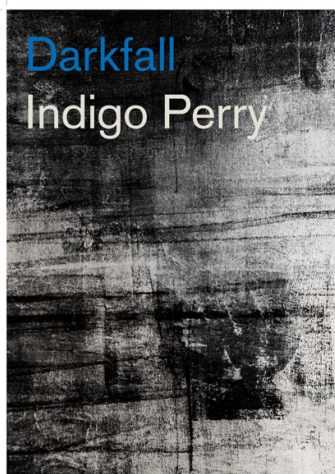
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TEXT review

Fragments of darkness and light: Life writing as ‘a loving act of reclamation’

review by Gemma Nisbet



Indigo Perry

Darkfall

UWA Publishing, Perth WA 2020

ISBN 978-1-76080-132-8

Pb 232pp AUD27.99

Near the beginning of her second memoir *Darkfall*, Indigo Perry recounts the time her childhood self – referred to, in the third person, as ‘she’ – entered a competition at her rural school for the best drawing of ‘what was coming’: the seasonal rainfall, ‘[w]etting the dry’. The younger Perry’s entry was an abstracted, impressionistic self-portrait – her ‘[h]air a scribble’; her [h]ands extended in stars’ – in which much of the page was inundated by a ‘rising wave ... shaded in black, silkily leaden’. She did not win the prize,

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which went to a ‘Grade Six boy with a more scientifically correct picture’. But ‘she thought hers to be truer’ (pp. 11-12). This passage can be read as both a primer and a statement of intent. It introduces the text’s preoccupations with darkness, stormy weather and the imagined or real threat of engulfment. It also signals that Perry is reaching for something more than straightforward factual accuracy in revisiting the oftentimes-traumatic events of her youth; that a kind of emotional authenticity may be the aim. An appeal to ‘emotional truth’ is quite often called upon to justify fictionalisation in nonfictional works of memoir [1], but I am not necessarily suggesting that is the case here. Rather, Perry’s work seeks to move away from a strictly realist mode of representation to something that more accurately represents the richly imaginative inner life she has said, in a podcast interview, that she developed ‘as a young person as a way of coping with not really understanding the culture that I was growing up in’ (Cook 2020). Thus, Perry has asserted, the book is ‘set in those places where I lived, but it’s also set inside me, in the imaginative landscape that I created in those times of my life’ (Perry 2019). In writing it, she has said, ‘probably the thing that interested me most ... was trying to create the mind of my younger self’ (Cook 2020).

Comprised of fragments ranging in length from a few paragraphs to a dozen pages, *Darkfall* brings together meticulously detailed scenes from its author’s childhood and adolescence in 1980s rural New South Wales. Perry, who is a senior lecturer in writing and literature at Deakin University, has published poetry as well as works of memoir, and her lyrical prose thrums with vivid, highly specific imagery: a grave that’s ‘wide like her parent’s bed’ (p. 29); tea that ‘tastes like the word *antique*’ (p. 32). In adopting a third-person narrative point of view, she gains some distance from her younger self, a girl referred to throughout simply as ‘she’ or ‘her’. By pairing this point of view with the present tense, Perry eschews the understanding and insight of the backwards-looking, reflective gaze, instead capturing the naive incomprehension that the girl – her younger self – experiences when confronted by the cruelty of the world around her. The effect of showing how events felt at the time, rather than how they appear in retrospect, is powerful. The towns where the girl grows up are beset by gendered violence and toxic masculinity. Perry depicts her father as kind and her mother as broadly supportive, but her girlhood self is bullied relentlessly by her peers. Upon moving to a new community, she is ‘punched in the face by a boy, who jumps off his bike to do it and to tell her nobody wants ugly girls in this town’ (p. 446). A group of boys who bark at her – ‘like dogs’; as if she is a dog – from the school bus (p. 100). Vicious yet casual cruelty towards animals is commonplace, and a parallel to women and girls is implicit: both groups are treated as low status and intensely vulnerable to the near-constant threat of violence.

Perhaps most troubling to the girl is the lack of justice for victims, human and animal. When her dog is shot dead in her family’s front yard, her parents dissuade her from reporting it to the police (‘Just let it be,’ they say) (p. 122). Later, after she witnesses

another girl being sexually assaulted while unconscious, her instinct to inform the authorities is thwarted by threats and the knowledge that justice would not be served by doing so, given the extent to which the local police officer is implicated in maintaining the town's misogynistic status quo. Registering this unfairness, the girl seeks to escape. She struggles to sleep, haunted by bad dreams that 'set into her like hard-punching rain'; nightmares of imagined 'murders she's inadvertently witnessed', of '[m]utilated bodies of strangers' and of running from something, certain that if she stops, 'she'll be the next one killed' (p. 125). To avoid these night terrors, she wanders the streets of the town after dark and bounces on her backyard trampoline by moonlight. Eventually, she runs away – briefly – to the city.

The escape she seeks is not only physical. The girl feels, at times, as though she is in two places at once: her bodily location but also a place of the mind, although the latter is often deeply disturbing. During a night-time trampoline session, she has a vision of her father's death: 'She jumps hard on the trampoline. But she's also somewhere else. There, her father dies, right in front of her' (p. 109). Later, her father – the real-life version of him – is furious. He came to look for her and couldn't find her. 'You weren't there,' he says. It's an ambiguous scene. The girl says she must have been lying down, out of his line of sight. Yet his words scare her, and add to her confusion about what is real and what it not: 'She's not here often, not really, not on the outside. But surely others can still see her even when she feels like that' (p. 111). Throughout *Darkfall*, it is sometimes difficult to tell what is real and what is dreamt or imagined. This reflects the girl's fractured sense of self and the way she, too, struggles to differentiate between these modes of perception and to understand the larger cultural and social forces at play around her. This is the imaginative landscape that Perry has sought to recreate; the thing I have called emotional authenticity.

Such ambiguity is also evident in the text's intricate and multifaceted recurrent imagery relating to darkness. For the girl, darkness represents both refuge and threat: a place to hide, but also a force that threatens to overwhelm her; that may provide cover to those who seek to harm her. There is the welcome darkness when she places a fabric cover over her budgerigar's cage so that it can sleep. But there is also the darkness of her roiling feelings, 'like circling thunderstorms' (p. 94), and the darkness out of which emerges the sinister man who tries to lure her into the park while she is walking home from Girl Guides (p. 57). This incident aside, the girl is 'never once afraid' while walking the streets 'alone and undisturbed' at night, but she does fear the darkness in her bedroom and sleeps with the light on (p. 167). After being chased home by local boys, '[s]he has to sleep with the light off, afraid they'll come back and see her' through the uncovered window (p. 98). Darkness and also light thus alternately expose and obscure, in ways that can be comforting or frightening.

All of this is bound up with the text's broader anxieties around revelation and concealment. The girl mostly does not want to be noticed, knowing it will only draw trouble. Eventually, she hides her inner life even from her parents, avoiding meeting their gaze for fear that they can 'peer inside her' and 'see the darkness that has filled her up' (pp. 172-4). Yet she also comes to fear she is disappearing; that '[s]he's here. She's there. She's here. She's not' (p. 136). She craves friendly attention; being 'seen' and thus accepted by her peers. She walks laps at the football ground on game days, 'yelled at and laughed at and spat on' as she passes the grandstand. Yet she presses on and begins another lap, 'as though something different will happen this time. Someone will smile at her. Someone will ask her to sit with them. To be their friend' (p. 134). This dynamic is also evident in the girl's obsession with Boy George. She 'has little interest in his music' and is drawn instead to his flamboyant personal style, attempting to copy his hairstyles, makeup and fashions (p. 115). This attracts derision, and a group of older boys from school, who pelt her with stones. But it also speaks to a quintessential tension of teenage identity: the desire to express oneself authentically, to be special, but also avoid standing out in a way that draws negative attention.

Perry has described how music was deeply significant to the composition of *Darkfall*, part of which was written during improvisational collaborations with trumpet player Andrew Darling [2]. It is through music that the adult Perry offers her younger self retrospective encouragement and comfort [3]. *Darkfall* begins with a list of 60 songs, a 'score' comprised of mostly 1980s alternative and post-punk releases whose titles also provide subheadings for each of the memoir's fragments. Perry has described these songs as a gift to her younger self: although she mostly did not have access to this music to during her adolescence, she suggests it 'would have soothed the noise in me and also brought out the sounds of my outrage and strength' (p. 209). Perry has called the inclusion of this score 'a loving act of reclamation' (Perry 2020), and this description could equally apply to *Darkfall* as a whole, given its potential to allow the adult self to witness and, perhaps, heal from adolescent trauma. Perry has written of how the composition of the book – particularly the collaborative sessions with Darling – lessened the power that 'the dark, tangled mass' of her childhood memories held over her, in spite of her initial reluctance to revisit them through writing (Perry 2020). This is, then, a story of an adolescent girl's traumatic coming of age, but also a testament to how she managed to survive.

Notes

[1] Vivian Gornick, for example, has said that in writing memoir, what has 'mattered most to me was not the literalness of the situation, but the emotional truth of the story' (2008, p. 7), while Mimi Schwartz has similarly urged writers of memoir to '[g]o for the emotional truth, that's what matters' (1998, p. 36).

[2] These collaborations have developed into a performance project called 'Illuminous', which incorporates live musical and projected text improvisations (Perry 2020).

[3] This sense of an adult self returning to offer support to the adolescent self was also made explicit by Perry in a podcast interview in which she describes how, as a young adult preparing to leave the town where she grew up, she had a vision of 'an older woman ... looking at me, and I had this quiet little thought of, "Oh, I reckon that's me when I'm older"'. Later, when she came to the end of writing *Darkfall*, Perry says she 'remembered what that vision looked like, and I could see how clearly it was me now, and I was actually wearing a jacket I have now' (Cook 2020).

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