**TEXT Vol 21 No 2 (October 2017)**

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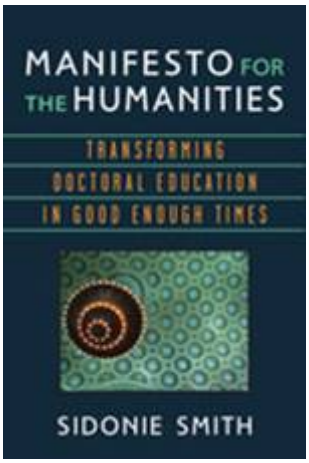
**TEXT review**

# Good enough and fabulously exciting times

## *review by Patrick West*




Sidonie Smith
*Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times*
Digital Humanities Series
University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor MI 2015
ISBN 9780472121717
Eb 238pp USD29.95

While reading Sidonie Smith's very impressive study of the current state of doctoral education in the Humanities and its future prospects and potential pitfalls, I also happened to be reading the even more recently published, edited collection *The Academic Book of the Future* (Lyons & Rayner 2016). In many ways the two go together. To take just one of many possible examples, *The Academic Book of the Future* extends Smith's argument that, in times that are rapidly changing as well as being simply 'good enough', we should be willing to explore forms of the doctoral dissertation that dare to break with, or at least freshly and differently inflect, the (relatively) long tradition of the PhD dissertation as proto-monograph.

On this point, Smith quotes with approval publisher and academic William Germano's proposition that 'Academe has been in the snow-globe business for years. The problem here is not the specificity of research but the intention of the finished product. Inward-looking, careful to a fault, our monographs have been content to speak to other monographs rather than to real, human readers' (138). This 'Age of the Reader' announced by Germano sits in the slipstream of Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author'. But it also fits nicely with the comment from Tom Mole in his contribution to *The Academic Book of the Future*: 'Not all of the academic book's future users will be human. As machine-reading, text-mining, online "social annotation" and related approaches come of age, the academic book will need to be optimised for new reading techniques' (Mole 2016: 15). Of course, no-one is saying that this is, or should be, the end of

'traditional' academic books, or even necessarily of the PhD dissertation as proto-monograph. Germano, Mole, and Smith herself, are simply pointing to current changes in the state of knowledge and the modes of its dissemination and, on that basis, attempting a history of the future in respect of scholarly publishing, the shape of doctoral dissertations, and of doctoral education.

As this example perhaps demonstrates, the triumph of Smith's book (and it is a triumph of its kind) lies in its combination of meticulous insights and detailed research into the current environment for doctoral education (and its origins) with a reaching out into related areas of interest and enquiry. Smith's book is like the hub of a wheel with many spokes. Alternatively, it works as a moveable part that can be fitted to other moveable parts. Mole's reference to non-human readers also weaves through Smith's chapter on 'The Possibly Posthuman Humanities Scholar'. 'Posthuman' is not the same as 'non-human', clearly, but this is the point: *Manifesto for the Humanities* practises what it preaches in respect of its portmanteau approach, its willingness to gather an assortment of elements into its argument. It is both about what it views as best practice in the PhD and also a species of monograph that exemplifies one instance of such a PhD. To quote from Germano again, Smith's book resembles a 'thing that "waits to be deployed" and thus has "consequence"' (138). As one would expect from any manifesto worth its salt, it has, and I think will continue to have, real-world impact.

In addition to all this, I was very impressed by the way Smith brought a Humanities approach and sensibility to her analysis of the current doctoral-education state of play. Smith's manifesto is remarkable for the subtlety of its engagements, its willingness to parry alternative positions, and its pragmatic yet principled defence of Humanities scholarship. It admirably lives up to the author's personal vision of her task in relation to the current order of things, as expressed here: 'For some, talk of change, with its rhetoric of urgency, becomes a trigger for holding fast to certain understandings of the life of the academic humanist. For others, it is a conundrum and a headache. I see it as an occasion to think purposefully about how to meet future challenges and how to calibrate the potential upsides of transformation' (108).

What might I add, then, in the wake of Smith's leadership in the conversation and her meticulous and passionate call to action? I am an Australian and Australian-based scholar whose teaching and research straddles the Humanities and the Creative Arts. I am also the Higher Degree Research Coordinator in my school at Deakin University, the School of Communication and Creative Arts. As such, it was interesting to reflect on Smith's manifesto from an antipodean and Creative Arts perspective, especially with the added context of Deakin's recent introduction of a new model of doctoral education in the form of PhD Xtra. A few things stood out for me. I was a little surprised that Smith did not spend more time discussing and describing the exciting innovations in PhD formats that for some time now have been coming out of the Creative Arts. In fact, on linking the Creative Arts to 'alternative forms of the dissertation' (148), Smith makes the single observation: 'Some English language and literature programs already offer students the option of a creative dissertation' (149). No doubt this (to me) absence or blind spot in Smith's book relates at least in part to the parallel tradition of the MFA in the American (but not so much the Australian) higher education context. Still, why should innovations in the MFA not be transferred across into

dissertation formats for American PhDs in the Humanities as defined by Smith?

Further, if I was to be picky, I'd note that for such an exciting and forward-thinking book, *Manifesto for the Humanities* does not draw on the energies and insights of the Creative Arts, or indeed of creativity in general, quite as much as I would have expected or liked. It is a very creative book, but would have benefitted from more engagement with the discourses and energies of creativity in the Arts and beyond. Australian PhDs in the Creative Arts, including Creative Writing in its close relationship with the Humanities discipline of Literary Studies, include an exegesis with the creative product. As such, the dissertation – or what Australian academics and PhD students would call a thesis – always already possesses a doubled quality that can morph into various modes of binary or non-binary relationships. If one were looking to experiment with new formats for the traditional Humanities dissertation in the American context then the thesis / exegesis format could well suggest some ideas.

A dissertation format, however, is not the same as a PhD model as in a model of candidature. Recently, on this point, there has been some increased discussion in the Australian higher-education media about how models of candidature might be distributed differently across the current divide between universities and industry or commercial entities. A large part of this relates to or impacts on supervision provenance and practices. At the far end of this scale, there have been calls for universities to forgo their monopoly on the granting of PhDs. More modestly, there is an increasing push for more and better cooperation between universities and industry. The current National Innovation and Science Agenda of the Australian Government drives much of this. It would have been interesting to hear more from Smith on how she sees dissertation models changing related to all the many and various recent changes in the relationship between the university, industry and industry-like bodies.

Smith's book is a capacious engagement with the modern state of doctoral education. I got a lot out of it. Still, I do wonder if the title and the sub-title are in somewhat more of a tension than is fully acknowledged in the body of the book. Let me tease this out a little. The transformation of doctoral education in (and for) good enough times may not necessarily coincide with the most effective manifesto possible for the Humanities. Alternatively, the latter may not necessarily merge seamlessly with the former, may not necessarily incorporate the form of Smith's transformed doctoral education. Taking either separately might have proved a better methodology for ultimately exploring the specificities of both. What type of doctoral education might best suit the Humanities? What constitution of the Humanities might best suit doctoral education? The book Smith has penned more than justifies its existence. By the form it has taken, however, it limits itself to a consideration only of the problems and possibilities that arise in the overlap between the Humanities and doctoral education.

In conclusion, Smith's book is more successful in the argument it appends to its title than in the one appended to (or at least implicit within) its sub-title. That is, there is a manifesto for doctoral education per se yet to be written, a manifesto that would conceivably encompass the Humanities and beyond. That said, it is hardly reasonable to expect more than one manifesto per book! I highly recommend *Manifesto for the Humanities* to everyone interested in the future of the Humanities and / or the future of doctoral education in these good enough and fabulously exciting times (for when are the Humanities and education in general anything but fabulous?).

In my work as a Higher Degree Research Coordinator at Deakin University, I have found myself thinking of this book, and talking about it, often. To borrow from William Germano again, Smith's book is very 'deployable'. It has 'consequence', weight, heft.

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**TEXT review**

# Looking behind the words: Patti Miller's *Writing True Stories*

## *review by Paul Williams*


Patti Miller
*Writing True Stories*
Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2017
ISBN 9781760293086
Pb 342pp AUD34.99

Philip Roth once quipped that 'Memoirs lie and fiction tells the truth' (quoted by Drabble 2010: 110). Life-writing is bedeviled with issues of truth-telling, not to mention problems with 'narcissism, the confessional impulse, sincerity, the hubris of assessing oneself with finality' (Powers 2016: 323). Far from being a simple act of remembering and reclaiming the personal past self in words, writing memoir needs careful negotiation with notions of truth / fiction, reader accountability and how history and the 'self' is constructed. Life writing, Margaret Drabble goes as far to say, is a 'dangerous game' (Drabble 2010: 111).

Patti Miller's *Writing True Stories* weaves adroitly through these issues. In this accessible and practical guide, Miller negotiates this 'dangerous' territory using the authority of personal experience and the support of a broad range of readings, sources and writing exercises to encourage her readers to find their own truth.

On first reading, I was struck by the weight this author gives to failure in her book. Miller acknowledges the pitfalls most of us will fall into when writing memoir. Note the chapter headings: 'Midway Blues – Continuing on', 'For the days when you think your writing is terrible', 'Difficulties of Truth telling', 'What goes wrong and how to avoid it', 'Avoiding Self-indulgence' and 'Difficulties'. Failing is an important part of the writing process, and by naming specific failures, as Miller does, we can be reassured we are on the right path, that Miller has been there too, and can guide us through those craggy parts.

*Writing True Stories* is divided into two sections – 'Starting Out' (a hands-on guide to the basic narrative elements such as voice, structure, etc.) and

'Masterclasses', where more experienced writers can tackle deeper issues such as the fuzzy line between memoir and fiction, the identity of the narrating persona, and the ethics of storytelling.

But why another book on memoir / life writing? Miller has written two successful books *Writing Your Life* (2001) and *The Memoir Book* (2007) that cover much of the same material, even with many of the same chapter headings. Is this an update or a consolidation of the others? In *Writing True Stories*, Miller explains that she is reaching 'wider areas of non-fiction – travel, personal essays, true crime, nature writing and the whole vast area of creative non fiction' (*ix*). But the sections on these other sub-genres are scanty (sometime just one page or two), and do not give the same nitty-gritty details as do the sections on travel writing and the personal essay. Yet the new book whets the appetite for those who wish to adventure further, and works well as a comprehensive textbook for a life-writing class.

Where Miller is at her best is when she helps life-writers go beyond mere narrative techniques that comprise most how-to-write-memoir books. She compels us to 'look behind the words' (124). Writing for Miller is a kind of 'sorcery' and she marvels how 'a system of signs on the page can enter the mind and cause the body to react as if it had received sensory input' (157). She encourages us to inhabit our 'earthy, sensory body' (156) in order to produce in our writing the 'lived texture of life' (157). Writing memoir is an act of defamiliarisation 'restoring the sensation of life' (54). 'Everyone's memory is a poet', she says (38).

Philippe Lejeune, in *On Autobiography*, stresses the necessity for the author, narrator and protagonist to be identical in an autobiographical work (Lejeune 1989: 4). Miller finds this confronting – we are 'required to be in two places or two roles at the same time, both narrator and principal protagonist' (2017: 183). Perhaps she could have invoked Barthes here who separates those (false) conflations of self and describes the writing of memoir as the reading of the past self as a text. This self should not be equated with the reader of that self (the writer) (Barthes 1977: 1).

But Miller takes the pragmatic approach, nodding to the basic tenets of post-structuralism: yes, she says, a narrator '"constructs" a narrative self' (185) and she acknowledges that words are not a window but 'more like permanent contact lenses that construct the world' (4), but reminds us that even though 'everything which passes through memory is fiction … we are, as a rule, not postmodernist in our daily interactions with people' (257).

We can feel the weight of her authority and the experience of a successful practising writer here, and it would be good for any would-be memoir writer to seek out *Ransacking Paris* and *The Mind of a Thief* as companion texts to *Writing True Stories* to see exactly how Miller works her magic.

> Why on earth couldn't the self be a respectable subject for literature? It was a territory as complex, as vast, as any other; a moment-by-moment hallucination of sense impressions, emotions and thoughts, continuously creating the experience of a shady chestnut tree, an itchy leg, a smiling face, a sense of belonging, of love and grief and delight. Wasn't an ungraspable sense of being, in fact, the only thing that connects each one of us? (Miller 2015: 12)

Miller does not only offer the do's and don't's of writing but the energy and exuberance of a raw writing practice. She urges us to:

> write with your heart and your gut, pegging the bloody mess out on the page … write wildly, fiercely, unrestrainedly, disturbingly, passionately … write without respect, write inappropriately, scream if you want to … write with only the fierce discipline of the desire for truth to guide you. (238)

Writing for Miller is experiential and practice-led: 'structure comes from within the material itself' (91). Creative practice is 'not a straight line but an experiential process with lots of trial and error' (24). Life-writing in Miller's hands is adept and malleable and innovative, and *Writing True Stories* will empower readers to 'communicate the curious nature of being' (*x*).

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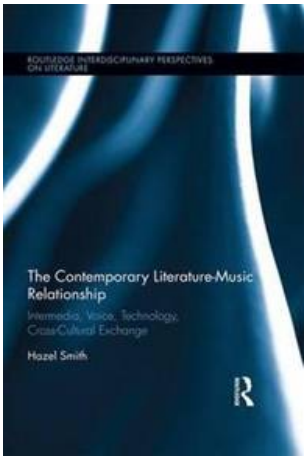
**TEXT review**

# Words and Music

## *review by Christopher Hill*




Hazel Smith
*The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship: Intermedia, Voice, Technology, Cross-Cultural Exchange*
Routledge, Oxford 2016
ISBN 9781138852051
Hb 202pp GBP110.00

In the introduction to *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship: Intermedia, Voice, Technology, Cross-Cultural Exchange*, Hazel Smith notes that 'it is difficult to think of words in isolation from sound and image' (1). Rather than being simply analogous, words and music function in symbiosis – one 'illuminat[ing] and extend[ing] the other' (10). And yet, despite the myriad of forms in which words and music come into contact, academic contributions exploring this relationship remain scarce. Smith's book, then, is a welcome addition to the study of music and literature and one that lays out fresh ground on discourse of the subject.

*The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship* offers a concise summary of the musico-literary field, acknowledging contributions from early proponents, particularly those within words and music studies that focus on analogies between the formal qualities of words and music. However, Smith also seeks to depart from this more traditional approach to analysis. She places emphasis on the culturalist approach that has emerged within musico-literary studies over the course of the twenty-first century. It is upon this trajectory that she positions her own work. While *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship* follows other recent books in this vein, what makes it unique is the breadth of Smith's writing. She combines a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of music and literature. Of particular interest to Smith is the notion of what she describes as 'musico-literary miscegenation', a concept that highlights both the synergetic relationship of words and music and the hybrid structures they form. She argues that the 'semiotic and perceptual

exchange[s]' that emerge from the concurrence of words and music can lead to the crossing of cultural boundaries – a theoretical thread that is evident throughout the book's chapters (23). Smith also pushes the boundaries of her analysis beyond traditional musical and literary texts, outlining the importance of intermedia and new technologies in understanding the evolving symbiosis of words and music and the creative processes that underpin this relationship.

Smith writes that she spent her early career as a professional violinist in London during the 1970s and 1980s – a uniquely informative experience for her chapter on Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (xi). Over the course of her career, she has transitioned into new media work combining her passion for music and performance with creative writing. This amalgam of creative interests underscores her academic research and her original insights into the relationship between music and literature. However, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the theories that Smith brings to bear upon the texts within this book, which draw upon and combine several fields including musicology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies and political economy, to name a few.

The first two chapters of the book are each dedicated to an analysis of an early twenty-first century novel. Chapter one, 'Musical Imaginaries, Disability and the Real', focuses on Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* and explores the different meanings of music, a particularly insightful analysis of the relationship between disability and creativity and the tension between professional music performance and the economics of music production. Chapter two, 'Glocal Imaginaries and Musical Displacements in Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing*', features a collection of analyses that scrutinise the contrapuntal relationship of words and music in relation to geography, race and identity.

Chapter three, 'Contemporary Poetic Improvisations: Music, Intermedia, Technology', shifts the focus from traditional literature to more contemporary forms of interaction between words and music. It outlines a history of poetic improvisation in the twentieth century and the genre's technological evolution, the development of sound improvisation and describes how computerisation of text – via algorithms – has become the new frontier of contemporary poetic improvisation. Chapter four, 'The Voice in Computer Music and its Relationship to Place, Identity and Community', reflects on the evolution of computer music and its relationship to voice. Smith threads strands of the themes explored in chapter two relating to geography, ethnicity and identity into her discussion of contemporary computer music and voice. Chapter five, '"The Rhythm of Living": SongTalk, Postmodern Eclecticism and Theological Cosmopolitanism in the Work of Kurt Elling', describes the work of Jazz Singer Kurt Elling analysing samples of his broad experimentation of SongTalk and the formal limits between words, sound and song. Chapter six, 'Musico-Literary Miscegenation and Screen-Sound Synergies in Electronic Literature', delves into the synergies of word and music within the context of electronic literature and includes analyses of several works within the field. The book ends with a brief coda in which Smith offers useful suggestions for future research.

In *The Contemporary Literature-Music Relationship* Smith offers a crucial extension of the definition and conception of both 'music' and 'literature' within musico-literary studies. She achieves this by exploring both novels and intermedia and applying an exhaustive array of theories to the texts

she analyses. In doing so, Smith has forsaken some depth for breadth. However, this compromise is an important one for a book seeking to expand an academic discipline that has confined itself far too narrowly to 'art' music and literature. In fact, popular music is one of the few forms of music not covered in the book, but even to this end, Smith offers a brief nod to the qualities of freestyle Rap music in Chapter three.
One of the book's essential qualities is to offer readers many prisms through which to understand the relationship between literature and music, linking the novel and intermedia. As Smith notes, 'One of the aspirations of the book is to create cross-relationships between the chapters about the novels and the later chapters, showing how the same themes or concepts emerge in different ways' (32-33).

For newcomers to musico-literary studies, Smith's book is an excellent introduction, not only because of the concision with which the author outlines the topic's history, but also because of the breadth of theories and analyses with which she explores. This book is an excellent and valuable volume and an important contribution to studies of music and literature.

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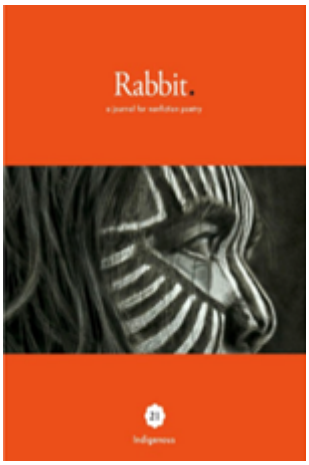
**TEXT review**

# Speaking country as self: Indigenous poetry

## *review by Josie Arnold*




*Rabbit. a journal for nonfiction poetry*
No 21 Indigenous
Jessica Wilkinson (ed)
Rabbit poetry journal, Melbourne 2017
ISBN 9780995390133
Pb 152pp AUD17.00

*Indigenous non-fiction poetry* brings forward questions of readers' expectations that most often are thoroughly formed and bound by Euro-western genre expectations. It is probably a bit late to challenge the nomenclature and the claim that this is 'a journal for nonfiction poetry', but I do find it an oxymoron – since poetry, however diverse, often offers a personal narrative that is clearly non-fiction.

This 'Indigenous' volume of *Rabbit* acknowledges that its name is a result of colonisation: of initially bringing rabbits to Australia, largely for fox hunting. Although the editorial by Jessica Wilkinson admits this, it is a rather shame-faced and unconvincing apologia.The contents of the book reveal so much more. The illustrations throughout are arresting and relevant as poetic texts in themselves, reminding us of the visual power of sixty thousand years of Indigenous painting in what is now Australia. Quite properly, in her editorial Alison Whittaker warns readers to 'brace for everything' (6). The images – often stark, always visually and spiritually engaging – demand our understanding *as* works of art but also because they are being positioned vis a vis word poetry. The visuals are a dynamic contribution to non-fiction poetry reminding us that what we see that is not in words is important, particularly in such painterly societies as First Nations.

Like painting, music is as central a concern as dance and storytelling in First Nations. Rap is increasingly a modality that Indigenous singers and poets use to express their word music and Phillip Hall's 'Millad Mob da Best!' (8) does not disappoint. It is a terrific poem that tells a horse riding

story with humour and impact. It covers so much story that we are there at the rodeo and singing in our heads as we read.

The powerful oppression that has endeavoured to silence the oldest living culture in the world lead Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1988 to abandon the Anglo-Australian assignation, Kath Walker, and reclaim her Indigenous name. In this tradition, Evelyn Araluen's 'gangguy' (12) builds upon Noonuccal's powerful body of work as she too rediscovers herself. The poem sits on the page with blank spaces and an individual layout that emphasises its form and reflects the content. It confronts me as an interloper as does her 'bury your own' (14). It confronts readers with the growth of Indigenous peoples today, as does Samuel Wagan Watson's 'My alphabet of terrors' (18). To the poet in me that loves the over one million words of English that give so much poetry to the world in so many forms, this is a very chilling loss. So many Indigenous languages have gone from the people.

Attuned as I am to Australian First Nations people, it is a surprise to go from 'My alphabet terrors' to the sophisticated form and content of Jose Trejo Maya's declaration about the Spanish invasion (20) still impactful today. In a similar vein I found the long half-empty pages of 'A Native American Poet to a Palestinian One' (62) by David Groulx distracting and calling for political insights into arguments about non-Indigenous matters. The parallel was not convincing to me. However, I was able to read in 'Over the River Memory' (113) by Jeanine Leane something all Australians should know about our history that also makes a timeless contribution to all displaced First Nation peoples whether Aboriginal or not. The big question they bring forward applies to non-Aboriginal people as well as Indigenous Australians: we are bonded by a sense of loss and displacement, so who are we today when the invaders are in control and we are the invaders facing the invaded in this book? Jack Sheppard's 'Fisherman's Bay' (24) is less successful as it seems to try too hard to confront capitalism, shopping centres and the lack of country for the traditional owners today. Jessica Hart's 'Gumba Thalun' (58)speaks to us all as we remember our own matrilineal lines and the power of the grandmother. In a similar vein the interview of Jeanine Leane by Matthew Hall presents a view of colonisation as destructive. She does warn not to 'lump all people of oppression together' (109) and this book would be stronger if this abjuration had been followed.

Janet Roger's 'Change' (26) is strong and speaks to loss whereas her 'My Niagara'(28) battles with metaphoric comparisons that don't really ring true to the subject of protecting history and also meeting fate, a theme that is at the heart of this story. Country is central to Indigenous existence and its loss has been a grievous scarring for over two hundred years. In her 'Pictures of Country' (32), Susie Anderson speaks to us of 'grief embedded into landscape' (33). She notes that Sydney Nolan's years in the Wimmera have redoubled the loss of land as they record a different light, farming land and a new edge that she longs to inhabit.

Of course, so many Indigenous peoples have been lost to their homes through diasporas caused by terror or hope: maybe a combination of both? Craig Santos Perez in 'Off-Island Chamorros' (36) urges himself (and the reader) to uphold the belief that Chamorros exist today wherever they now live and he mourns at the fact that the Pacific island 'will continue to change until it becomes unfamiliar to us' (8). His final impactful line speaks to the land that has been lost by almost all Indigenous peoples: 'home is an archipelago of belonging' (38) and is resonant with loss and

longing. His ‘During Your Lifetime’ (40) echoes this. The Aboriginal poems are very convincing but I am not so sure about placing them alongside other poets from different Indigeneity. The short poem by Anwer Ghani on ‘Saba Breeze’ (56) evokes a similar sense of loving the land, but is rather evanescent in the context of this production despite similar revelations of pain, yearning and exclusion.

‘Skin’ (42) by Mitch Tomas Cave also resounds with a deep sense of loss. As I read the poems in this book I become more and more sad. I feel the burden of the convict colonisers in my family who contributed to this, the burden of my own life as owning land, the burden of the past, present and future of broken dreams. I remind myself of the growing power of representatives of the Aboriginal Australians who are struggling with their people coming from so many lost or ignored nations. As Ellen O’Brien records in ‘Birds’ (44), this has a personal family impact and is terrible. Kate Daglas also speaks to this describing how the invasion meant judgements and rejections even when they conformed: judgements she continues to fight against. In her poem about ‘Black Ducks’ (72) Hannah Donelly continues to express the dreadful truth about the displacement and massacre of so many Aboriginals and to show this is not an historic act: it is not over.

Indigenous Australians have many songlines and stories, and long narratives were, and still are sometimes chanted by their nominated owners to record these and other stories that are precious to the people. Because early European ethnographers were male, most women’s stories remained untold, unrecorded by diligent scholars, but not forgotten. In her ‘Out ofChoice’ (46), Kristine Ellis reminds us that the child at the campfire who had so many aunty-mothers is placed by the invaders’ practices in an unsympathetic unmarried mother’s home in ‘the big city’ (47) for shame.

There is the ongoing fight to be, to exist and be seen and Paul Collis records his anger and fighting spirit in ‘Dirty Me, Bloody You: The Fight Back’(48) and leads into Makayla-May Brinkley’s account of being crushed again and again by the way her beliefs are scoffed at and derided. The sounds of the sticks, of stamping feet and the didgeridoo are in this land, and this musicality is evident in the story in Raelee Lancaster’s poem ‘I grew up’ which records how her child-self wanted to ‘change the public opinion’ (76) in response to the deep hurt caused by the taunt of being one of the indigenous ‘golliwogs’. Indiah Money’s ‘Mimicking the Other’ (78) is a plaintive cry that echoes ‘can the subaltern speak?’, whilst Nyein Way’s ‘Grassland’ (81) fails to convince this reader despite its adventurous layout: it is too self-consciously clever.

The narrative of self is a significant element of these poems throughout and the talking circle is enhanced by the story of – and interview with – Natalie Harkin. I’m quite comfortable with both being described as Indigenous poetry describing her installations. When she opens the archive box of what happened to Australia’s First Nations I am blown away by the revelation that it is still happening. The challenge to go forward is hard to accept given the past. As I read Evelyn Araluen’s ‘Shame and Contemporary Australian Poetics’ (117) I realise again the importance of language and the great losses that have occurred and are only recently being clawed back. Brianna Bullen quite rightly discusses multiplicity (128) without placing Aborigines as a mere strand within it, whilst Phillip Hall’s review of Samuel Wagan Watson’s ‘Monster’sInk’ (134) indicates the impact of prose poetry without delegating it to a sub-genre.

Altogether this book offers a great deal: maybe too much?

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**TEXT review**

# A deep archive flows

## *review by Natalie Harkin*


Jeanine Leane
*Walk Back Over*
Cordite Books, Melbourne 2017
9780648056850
Pb 84pp AUD20.00

As a lover of poetry, family history, rivers and archives, it is not easy to stay afloat when immersed in the torrent imaginings of Wiradjuri poet Jeanine Leane's latest book, *Walk Back Over*; best to surrender, ride with the undercurrents and open up to savour it all. This work extends her first chapbook, *Dark Secrets After Dreaming (AD) 1887-1961*, which 'moves from campfire to captivity to confinement and through colonialism' (2010). Over time Leane has fine-tuned a poetic rage juxtaposed with love from her sovereign Wiradjuri woman standpoint, as deep and layered as the rich sediment of her ancestral Murrumbidgee River – grounded, yet never still.

This collection is dedicated to Leane's Aunty Betty who taught her to love words, and for this we can be thankful. Ellen van Neerven's stunningly astute introduction ensures that we too 'will return often to this scented writing' (xiii); we inhale, slowly: 'When we absorb knowledge, we become larger' (xiii).

> Aboriginal women are the great gatherers of many things.
> (xi)

There are four distinct parts to this collection: 'Walk Back Over'; 'Country'; 'The Montego-Yangshou Express'; and 'Walk Back Over'. Leane begins by paying homage to those women who raised her; those women with 'vast reserves of inner-strength' (xi) who survived oppressive histories under segregation, protection and assimilation, and who passed on their creative resilience as acts of activism. Their inner-strength reserve is indeed vast, for Leane's words seek out and divine history's painful

depths, through and beyond the colonial archive, so we may share a weight that is the collective burden of colonialism.

'Archive' is the feature metaphor here, where memories, knowledge and literary imaginings are mindfully mined from body, country, river, tree, and family story. Leane also writes back / Black to those archival 'institutions' such as State records, museums, universities and libraries; institutions that have collected, catalogued, contained and displayed insurmountable data on Aboriginal lives, in the name of science. These institutions profess to know our families through a cultural and physical-anthropology sampling of bodies and minds; dissected and carved on cutting boards in blood-quantum portions:

> That's my past on your cutting board
> dismembered, cut up, mutilated
> and dispersed – posted around the world in boxes
> for examination. (8)

These myth-making institutions proliferated a racist and eugenics-based ideology that directly informed public policy that governed Aboriginal lives. Leane's opening poem, 'Cardboard incarceration', is a visceral entry-point to the contents of a colonial archive-box which left me gasping for air and straining for light:

> This cardboard prison they call an archive
> is cold, airless and silent as death. (3)

The act of consigning truth and order to the official record also required that some things be discarded, suppressed or consigned to the margins. Our history books are thus replete with 'black and white pages where nameless, the placeless and timeless, historyless people dwell' (29), and Leane's poetry challenges us to question all that is centred and normalised; to seek what is rendered invisible or lost, and to question whose voices and truths are privileged and represented in these spaces. The archive-box is replete with secrets, ripe for revelation. She speaks to the un-spoken and writes to the un-written, spearheading what has been omitted from official documents, including 'emotion and the other sides of paper' (xi).

In part one of this collection, Leane's blood-memory pumps every syllable to rupture that point of colonial desire where racism and sexism intersect – like an embodied requiem 'for the Black women in the white archive' (5):

> Remember
> how your first record is deep in my body.
> Your memory lives deep in my body.
> I'm still looking – don't let 'em tell you
> that I ever forgot. (5)

With all the tension and allure of a good mystery, her words keep us sifting, dusting and scratching at the colonial 'crime scene' surface of her story, which is indeed everyone's story. In a moving tribute to Lady Mungo she writes:

> First time I left my Country was
> in a suitcase bound for university
> to be studied by experts.
> Why are you stealing us –
> Dead or alive? (6)

Her selection of poems in part two, 'Country', read like an ode, to memories of childhood and apricot sunsets; to felled river red gums and wide brown lands; to Murrumbidgee tides, and to beloved elders passed. Her poem 'River Memory', the life-blood of her country, is the pulsing heart of this collection:

> The bend
> of the Murrumbidgee – a deep archive – flows
> steady and slow. (25)

This 'deep archive' can never be fully erased and will make itself known in unanticipated moments. It can trigger a haunting re-memory; it can reckon with iconic colonial structures – 'the river rose and swallowed the bridge and town' (25) – to leave an empty stone convent and a half-standing bridge in its wake.

Part three of this collection, 'The Montego-Yangshou Express', is a kind of travelogue interlude beyond local archive and country, and works to inform our global imaginings through an astute anti-colonial lense. Her observations are epitomised in 'Montego Bay, 2012', as Jamaican labourers load foreign ships in the blazing sun, with sugar, tea and spirits – 'A long day in Montego Bay / for an English high tea' (46).

Jeanine ultimately returns to those many spans of Australia that require us to revisit and contemplate a bit longer; to walk back over – bridges, rivers, memories, loss – so we might collectively gain something new and renewed, even in the face of longing and forever-mourning. Her final poem 'Easy' (57) is a profound comment on the un-resolve that shadows suicide. Some tragedies and secrets can never be healed or fully revealed, but she shows us how a gathering of words, a poem, can sustain that inner-strength resilience from ancestors like those women who guide her, so we do not drown, but rise-up and continue to breathe, long into the future.

*Walk Back Over* is an exciting addition to Cordite Books' second series. It is an archive-intervention; a deep contemplation on country and the history of place. It reveals Australia's violent foundations that continue to inform an ongoing project of colonialism, and it is Jeanine Leane's poetic-justice reminder to us all – to listen to voices that drive the tides; to move with the turbulence and settle where we are meant to, with the finest shifting and drifting sands.

*Natalie Harkin is a Narungga woman from South Australia. She is an academic and activist-poet with an interest in the state's colonial archives and Aboriginal family records. Her words have been installed and projected in exhibitions comprising text-object-video projection. She has written with* Overland*,* Southerly *and* Cordite*, and her first poetry manuscript,* Dirty Words*, was published by* Cordite Books *in 2015.*

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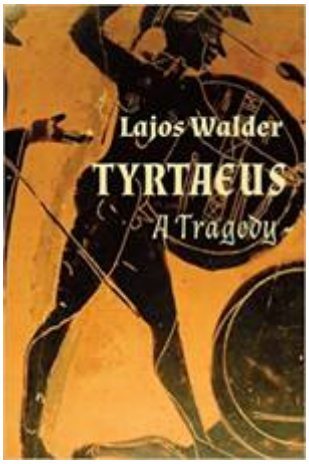
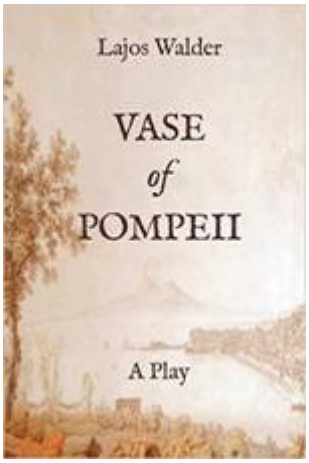
**TEXT review**

# Playing humanity's anthem of grief: the plays of Lajos Walder

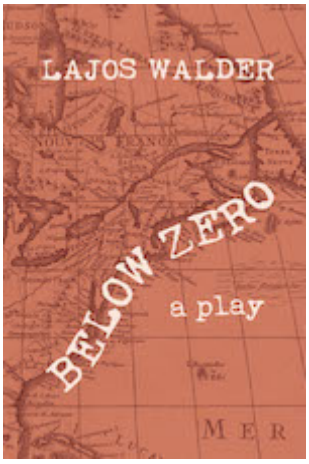
## *review by Jane Montgomery Griffiths*




Lajos Walder
*Tyrtaeus: A Tragedy*
Agnes Walder (trans)
UWSP, New York 2017
ISBN 9781935830368 (print)
ISBN 9781935830399 (ebook)
Pb 120pp USD18.95




Lajos Walder
*Vase of Pompeii: A Play*
Agnes Walder (trans)
UWSP, New York 2017
ISBN 9781935830375 (print)
ISBN 9781935830405 (ebook)
Pb 80pp USD17.95




Lajos Walder
*Below Zero: A Play*
Agnes Walder (trans)
UWSP, New York 2017
ISBN 9781935830382 (print)
ISBN 9781935830412 (ebook)
Pb 88pp USD17.95

> 'I would like to make life endurable for people – therefore I am a poet'
> Lajos Walder, *Tyrtaeus*

Seven decades on, the sheer enormity of the Second World War's toll is still too immense to comprehend. The volume of lost lives, wasted potential and human suffering remains unfathomable. Sometimes, however, works re-emerge that give a face, a name and a voice to the millions dead. Agnes Walder's translations of her father's plays do just that. These works are more than labours of love from a dedicated daughter for the father she never knew. They are testaments to destroyed talent but also to the power of art and language to transcend and survive even the most brutal of times. Lajos Walder was a young, yet already esteemed poet, in 1930s Hungary. Writing under the pseudonym 'Vandor' (wanderer), his poetry, published in English translation by Agnes Walder in 2015, spoke with an urgent, unique voice crying out against the rise of totalitarianism. Born in 1913, he battled against the entrenched anti-Semitism of Hungarian society in the pre-war years: although graduating as a lawyer, he had been forbidden to practise his profession by the Hungarian Jewish laws, and was instead forced to work as a factory labourer. Conscripted into a forced labour battalion during the war, he was ultimately sent to Gunskirchen concentration camp, where he died on May 7th 1945, the day of the camp's liberation.

This collection of new translations of the plays of Walder gives us an insight into the potential of a tragically lost talent. Although much of his poetry had been extant, Walder's theatrical work had remained within the family and did not receive publication in their original Hungarian until 1990. They have also yet to receive professional production. Now translated into English for the first time, these three plays demonstrate Walder's philosophical and political beliefs, his curiosity about the human condition, and his eye for theatricality that was both challenging and innovative. Walder's dramaturgy is more interested in how the theatrical form can be used to highlight moral and ethical imperatives than theatrical showmanship. To a contemporary reader or audience, used to the condensed ellipses of post-dramatic playwriting, the plays can seem dense

and occasionally prolix: rich in language and occasionally didactic with political debate. Yet, there is much to recommend in these scripts. Each play, very different from its fellows, shows poetic sensibility, characterisational complexity and dramaturgical innovation. He uses theatre less as entertainment, more as a provocation for questioning complacent assumptions. The translations are highly welcome, and Walder's voice is one that should be heard.

The most challenging in this collection is Walder's fascinating, although I'd hazard almost unstageable, play *Tyrtaeus.* Based on the apocryphal life of the eponymous archaic poet and his rise to power in Sparta, this is a rich, dense, and politically fascinating work. As Agnes Walder, quoting Geza Hegedus, points out in her 'Afterword', the Greek lyric poets, including Tyrtaeus, 'were approached with the closeness of friends' (107). Walder himself demonstrates his classical knowledge throughout, cherry picking the disputed ancient sources for his hero and creating a figure who is simultaneously admirable and conflicted. The colourful excess of Pausanias and The Suda is gone: instead in the protagonist we have a philosopher, a teacher, an orator, and a born leader. We also have a man who has battled physical disability – a reason for infanticide in Sparta and something which will become a pivotal plot point in the play.

For all Walder's classical knowledge, *Tyrtaeus* is much more than a mere historical fantasy. His Sparta is a chilling metaphor for the rise of Nazism. Sparta's adoration of physical perfection finds its parallels in the Nazi's fetishisation of racial purity and eugenics. The city state's people follow the party line with blind fanaticism in the face of truth and humanity. This is exemplified in the play's opening, a brutal depiction of the Spartan training regime for young men. Physical prowess, unwavering obedience, and unquestioning patriotism are drilled into the teenage boys. These boys could as well be in a Hitler youth training camp as an ancient gymnasium. Individuality is met with brutality: mob mentality rules. It is an arresting opening: Walder peppers his dialogue with sadomasochism, homoeroticism, entrenched misogyny and dangerous monomania, yet underlying it all is a deep melancholy at the innocence lost.

The entry of battle-weary soldiers escorting prisoners of war back to Sparta changes the tenor of the play. Illusion and reality – the illusion of glorious victory, and the reality of the bloody futility of war – clash: fanatical self-delusion supersedes acceptance of the truth that Sparta is losing the war. Among these prisoners is Tyrtaeus. He is a strong character from the outset: lame yet unbowed, quietly defiant, disconcertingly proud. As the play progresses, this quiet resolve of the protagonist starts to undermine the certainty of his Spartan captors. Tyrtaeus, the lame Athenian tutor, becomes leader and saviour of these captors.

One of the things that makes this a difficult play in theatrical terms is what, to a modern reader, is its didactisim and philosophising. Tyrtaeus and ephor Eupator philosophise in a manner that could come straight from Plato or Aristotle. Yet it is this very use of the theatrical form to debate and analyse concepts of justice, the limits of state control and the individual's responsibility that makes the play so fascinating. Tyrtaeus's rhetoric to his captors is compelling and has the urgency of Walder's own voice:

> A people who live in ignorance under the command of a lying tyrant – a people who sunk into delusion – an uneducated lot who haven't found a teacher. (27-28)

In its contemporary context, the work stands as a cry for freedom against the repression that was to take Walder's life. Walder is, however, no reductionist: he sees the conflicts in democracy, and as Tyrtaeus becomes the effective ruler of the Spartans, sees also the corrupting influence of power. Tyrtaeus's motives are far from innocent; he becomes seduced by his own oratory; and in the denouement of the play, he finds that compassion is powerless in the face of populist rhetoric. The plays screams at the injustice of his times, but its message is horribly pertinent today and there are telling resonances to contemporary politics and the rise of the populist right.

Earlier, I suggested that the play was unstageable. This is less to do with Walder's skills as a dramatist than to do with the sheer resources required to stage it. It is a huge and epic beast, requiring, in its current form, a cast size well beyond the finances of any professional company. Yet the play deserves to be heard. With judicious adaptation and dramaturgical editing, it would be a powerful and profoundly relevant script for today. It is urgent, impassioned, complex and intellectually satisfying, and if the right adaptation could be made, deserves to be staged.

*The Vase of Pompeii* is an altogether different theatrical beast. A symbolist chamber drama, its scale could not be further from the expansive and epic sweep of *Tyrtaeus*. Walder's fascination with individual responsibility is, however, just as evident. This taut and subtle examination into memory and fate weaves together dream-like sequences, flashback and seemingly real-time dialogue to interrogate how the decisions one man makes can shape lives and destinies. Monsieur Lebordin, the protagonist, is a sixty-year-old art historian. He lives a solitary life; alienated from his family, incapable of relationships, he finds love not in human interaction, but in the materiality of the past in the shape of his prized possession, the vase of Pompeii. The arrival of the mysterious young woman Angela rocks the foundations of his misanthropic world. Although seemingly an ambitious young would-be academic wanting a reference from the older scholar, Angela is protean. She comes to embody each of Lebordin's loves – or fixations – through his life. In a series of flashbacks we see Lebordin at fifteen, twenty, thirty, and forty, each time falling in love with a different incarnation of Angela, and each time losing her through his own folly, fear or stubbornness. Lebordin, for all his success as a classical art scholar, is a failure at life, existing in the half-life of 'the grey ones' who have run from possibilities. As Lebordin reminisces and assesses his life, we realise that Angela is now the Angel of Death. Lebordin has finally accepted his love, and allows the embrace of Death as an acquittal of life.

As with *Tyrtaeus*, Walder's language in the play is dense, occasionally gnomic, and rendered with deep poetic sensibility:

> If I could make a single violin string out of the sadness that lives in people, on that one string alone I could play humanity's anthem of grief, to which, perhaps even God would pay attention. (70)

His characterisation of the different Lebordin's is fascinating: subtle shifts in language and desires compellingly differentiate the different ages of man. It is, however, very much a *man's* play. To a contemporary reader, the one-dimensionality and purely functional characterisation of the Angelas can seem reductive. These women exist not in their own right, but only as objectified ciphers for Lebordin's memories and desires. In that, however, we can see the cleverness of Walder's conceit. The women of Lebordin's

life are as objectified as his Pompeiian vase and as devoid of internal life as the materiality of the clay that created his most precious belonging. These are not real women, nor can they be. They are fantasies contextualised by history, hence fitting objects of desire for a man who can only love the imagined past.

This is a skilful and structurally fascinating play. We could find strong parallels with J B Priestley's plays in terms of the fascination with the past and alternating temporal planes. Some judicious dramaturgical cuts would probably improve it for stage performance, but it has a strong theatrical dynamic and warrants production.

While *Tyrtaeus* is one of a kind, and *The Vase of Pompeii* finds parallels in Priestley's work, *Below Zero* resonates, in its subject and tenor, with Sartre's *Huis Clos* and Pinter's middle period. Set in an isolated Canadian weather station, the play is an examination of suppressed passion, thwarted desire and the banality of inaction. The tediously officious Dupois has been stationed for some years at a remote radio shack. His wry, clever and passionate wife Patricia accompanied Dupois, and while initially her love for him ameliorated the boredom, she can now no longer endure her frustration. For the past year, the ambitious young Lemoine has shared the posting, prior to his relocation to the city. As the play begins, Lemoine is preparing for his departure, and plans, we learn, to leave with Patricia, with whom he has been having an affair. Dupois responds to the news with threats of violence, infantile petulance, and pathetic desperation. Into this *menage a trois*, the charismatic and mysterious Pepaine enters. This is a man who, in his own world vision, had the courage to act on his passion, to commit murder in revenge for his partner's infidelity. He is everything Dupois is not, and the challenging clarity of Pepaine's moral relativism stands in sharp contrast to the saggy posturing of Dupois's rhetorical manipulations. In an extraordinary scene, Patricia and Pepaine discuss the ethics of his homicidal revenge, and draw close to each other with an attraction that is equally matched with revulsion. This is without doubt the stand-out scene in the play, and demonstrates the sheer characterisational skill of which Walder was capable. Finally news come that Dupois and Patricia have been relocated by head office to the city and Lemoine is to stay. Husband and wife leave in a reconciliation of convenience, and Lemoine is left to contemplate his next affair with the wife of the new station assistant.

This synopsis suggests that the play is merely a conventional situational drama involving itself in scratching the scabs of festering relationships. The play is much more than that, however. It is not the situational plot constructions that stay in the mind, but the strange, disconcertingly peculiar characterisations that hold sway in the script. Each of the characters is fully formed through dialogue. Dupois's bourgeois pomposity is peppered with lines that ring out in their oddness and truth: 'Let us be sterile, Lemoine. Let's rinse our emotions in the disinfectant of reality' (14).

Pepaine's ethical existentialism is both abhorrent and appealing:

> You are so small that you should be examined under a microscope like the protozoon of which there are a thousand billion in a glass of water. And each one of them thinks that he alone exists and that he alone is the crown of creation. (56)

Most interesting of all, Patricia's dialogue creates a character that is extraordinarily complex: passionate, yearning, sexual and fascinating. In her banal and quotidian environment, she manages to rival Phedra and Hedda for female longing, frustration and sensuality:

> Life is the greatest penance, Pepain. To live next to a man whom one doesn't love is the greatest penance for sins never committed. (66)

*Below Zero* is a truly provocative yet entertaining work, one which is a pleasure to read, and would be even more pleasurable to see staged. It equals in its relational scope some of the great family dramas of mid-20th century theatre; yet it is its *oddness* that is so compelling, innovative and theatrically fascinating. Walder's originality and uniquely creative take on human foibles shines through in this play.

Agnes Walder's achievement in bringing these plays to an English-speaking audience cannot be overstated. Not knowing Hungarian, I can make no comments on translational fidelity or effectiveness. But as a theatre practitioner and scholar, I can say that the language is rich, poetic, theatrically dynamic, and often provocatively compelling. These three plays are a major achievement, and Agnes Walder is not only to be congratulated, but also thanked for bringing her father's stage work out into the light.

*Jane Montgomery Griffiths is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Theatre and Performance at Monash University. She has published widely on Greek tragedy and adaptation and is an award-winning actor and playwright. Her plays include* Sappho…in 9 fragments *and adaptations of* Antigone *and Dorothy Porter's* Wild Surmise *(all for Malthouse Theatre).*

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**TEXT review**

# ‘What we may be[come]’: a case of identity – Quinn Eades’ *Rallying*

## *review by Pablo Muslera*


Quinn Eades
*Rallying*
UWA Publishing, Crawley WA 2017
ISBN 9781742589190
Pb 128pp AUD22.99

Lord, we know what we are, but know
not what we may be
– *Hamlet* IV.v.43-44

Identity is central to *Rallying*, a collection of poetry from a trans writer so candid about his journey from mother of two to identifying as a male. The introductory ‘How to disappear in your name’ is a fourteen-page stream of consciousness prose poem introducing nine of Eades’ former personas. PK is the little girl losing her first tooth at breakfast:

> …chewy sultanas
> oats that grind
> then rock gravel stone
> a tooth bitten out
> a breakfast tooth… (11)

Free verse stanzas like this serve as the refrain between the more open-ended stream of consciousness sections, where we’re introduced to Bella:

> …the sister-name the one she is called by when needed
> when loved when wanted for opening jars or reading that
> story Bella,
> please, that one… (13)

Francis is associated with sexual awakening:

> …the name she chooses for herself when she is
> twelve … she tries and fails to get others to say it aloud so
> at night, under
> her blue and white striped sheet, two fingers inside herself,
> pushing at
> her own edges, she whispers it… (14)

Stevie is an assertion of public identity, railing against traditional portrayals of femininity:

> …black eyeliner for lipstick her lips turning her mouth into
> a red
> wet cavern lined by a matt night sky. She is thick black
> tights, stolen
> silver rings on every finger and each thumb, doc marten
> boots. (15)

There are other personas associated with addiction, and the acts undertaken to feed it:

> Rayne: This name, she takes for anonymity … for the
> way that heroin turns each day grey…
> …morning is hunt sell buy
> acrid powder sizzle…

Within this is a glimmer of the poet struggling to emerge from the junkie: 'try to make a story / from abject fluid' (16). Eades' unflinching self-examination continues, rationalising her daily realities into alternate identities:

> Persephone lives in Rayne she is the dungeon worker
> she treads through room after room…
> …Sarah lives after Persephone. After rooms with no
> daylight
> after being always held. Down. Sarah lives in a different
> set of rooms
> plastered with mirrors and on the bed, too many towels…
> (17)

> …Karina is detox with two garbage bags of clothes…
> Karina is meetings, meetings, meetings…
> It takes her ten years to move out of all those rooms,
> filled with circles of people, helping each other to get or to
> stay clean.
> And then? Karina is writing. (18)

The narrative continues its visceral trajectory to one of motherhood, where 'Mama' is 'made in the blunt vice of birth / through muscle and blood and milk and bone' (19). Mama becomes Quinn, who:

> comes after the first book is written, after the
> hysterectomy the surgeon said she had to have…
> after she couldn't
> stay at one end of the gender binary any more. (22)

This new name also signifies a change of gender '…It is this calling, this naming, that changes she to he…' (23), but also one encapsulating maternity, shown in a tender exchange between mother and child:

> ‘Can I still call you Mama?’…
> ‘Yes, of course’.
> ‘But now you’re a boy Mama?’
> ‘Now I’m a boy Mama’. (23)

The deceptive ease of holding these two worlds, of motherhood and male identity, in the phrase ‘boy Mama’ is part of Eades’ skill as a writer. He presents the unfathomably complex shift of gender and identity as plainly as a child’s neologism. Eades’ self-scrutiny focuses on the breakdown of a long-term relationship resulting from his transition: ‘The sixteen-year relationship doesn’t survive because the changing of / the name is a shell that holds the changing of a pronoun, the changing / of a body, the shining bright terror of stepping somewhere new…’ (23).

The rest of the book is loosely divided into five sections, dealing primarily with identity, mortality, and motherhood. After the searing opening salvo of ‘How to disappear in your name’, the remainder is more contemplative, steeped in the quiet reflection of these daily moments. ‘Shine on me’, the first poem in the section ‘Under them’, is an exception to this rule. It continues the forensic narration of Eades’ life: ‘I left home when I was 16 … I lost my virginity with the girl upstairs in my single bed. She bled on me and the sheets’ (26).

But the mood softens when Eades becomes a mother, and ‘they came. those boys who said “look at me I’m a poppy” and “mama” and “I love you”’ (28). Life vacillates between the daily domesticity of children’s demands of ‘toast with no crumbs’ (36) and the revelation that her boys are also ‘love’s splintering heart’ (37). The playfulness of ‘the table … resents elbows’ (40) contrasts against ‘Arguments wait for months, next to the cupboard that holds our towels’ (44). The identity tension between mother and writer is summarised in ‘This unbearable split / My waterlogged skin. / No. This. Want. / Mother. / Poet. / We.’ (49).

The next section, ‘Away with them’, details family holidays, and the previous stream of consciousness prose sections are discarded for briefer lines of free verse, heavy with enjambment: ‘He puts his shorts back on and / stows fried rice under the seat / watermelon in an ice-filled esky’ (69). Travel observations mingle with writing anxiety: ‘This resort kills poems. / It pretends at being Thailand. / but the grass is too short, / the geckos are tamed, / the chili [*sic*] is mild, / the fish are fed twice a day, / and the birds are on a timer’ (64).

‘Without them’ is a more introspective section, where Eades travels alone, and ironically seems to justify the previous fear of writer’s block, lacking some of the energy and edginess of the previous chapters. Repetitive refrains of ‘In the Alfama’ where ‘everybody smokes’ and ‘all the streets are cobbled’ (78) might be taken from any number of generic travel poems, until Eades admits, ‘This city is water and brick. It won’t be known’ (90).

‘Around them’ returns Eades home, and there is vigour and insight into her childhood in the title poem ‘Rallying’:

> I had watched my mother
> with my sister and I, the two
> children who were meant to change
> her life (we changed her life),
> and it did not look enticing…

> …it was 1979, and we were blonde girl children
> with a mother who was cracking, yelling
> bondage up yours and jumping off
> second hand couches like we could fly. (94-95)

There is dry humour in the contemplation of mortality in this section, with the complications of nipple rings and chest x-rays: 'in hospitals, steel and desire do not mix' (107). There is eloquence and candour in the trauma of a hysterectomy, '…They talk / about us in the third person not knowing / we are fourth person poetic split by pain / … you are gone … you are hazard, removed, and the absence of pain. / Ovary. Egg layer. Possibility thrower. / Gone.' (109-110).

What comes next starts with a sensuous observation of daily pleasures: 'You swallow sugar cubes whole / syrup murmurs glaze my tongue'. The intimacy and second person perspective continues in the next poem: 'you smother me with featherlight kiss, your creamy skin … your smile dusky / cochineal lips lift my skin away / …I am ready' (131-132). The promise of sensual reawakening is fulfilled in 'Swim': '…we are octopus arms slippery legs strong bellies… You fit. You just fucking fit, / you say in your tear strung voice on the phone, in bed … You're for me, I say, throwing / fear, knowing rightness / … what comes next?' (138).

What comes next, indeed, for a poet who has already held up a light to some of the most painful experiences and challenges to self that an individual might have? *Rallying* confronts our notion of 'normality' through a searingly honest blend of stream-of-consciousness prose and free verse enjambment, where shifting poetical forms also reflect a transition in identity and gender. Throughout, Eades engages us by navigating these spaces in full view, simply stating: 'I'm here', and daring us to judge what that means.

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**TEXT review**

# Singing the spirit child: Dominique Hecq's *Hush: A Fugue*

## *review by Rose Lucas*


Dominque Hecq
*Hush: A Fugue*
UWA Publishing, Crawley WA 2017
ISBN 9781742589473
Pb 69pp AUD22.99

*Hush: A Fugue* is Dominique Hecq's sixth book of poetry. Her poetry – like her other creative and scholarly work – is informed by the wealth of her personal and intellectual experience, reflecting issues of physical and linguistic dislocation as well as the influence of a psychoanalytic and post-structural literature on loss, grief and subjectivity. This collection clusters explicitly around the theme of loss; in particular, it retraces a very personal narrative of the loss of a child to cot death. Years may have passed, other children arrived and grown – but the shocking 'white wax' of the beloved baby's face remains a potent presence in his mother's life. Almost twenty-five years later, this powerful and disturbing collection both marks the enduring presence of the lost child and traces the almost unbearable experiences of grief and mourning, finally possible to articulate within the flexibility of the poetic voice.

Hecq's title encapsulates the collection's central themes. The notion of the fugue is of course multivalent. On one level, it evokes the notion of extreme emotional alienation. To be in a fugue state is to be out of step with what we think of as the 'normal' world of verifiable reality, to be in an almost nightmare state, no longer willing to be fully in the world, longing for food but unable to offer it or to take it in. In a Lacanian sense, this self has come adrift from the 'name' which linked her to the world:

> The Mother, for lack of a proper name, formerly myself…
> She felt as though she had forgotten what it was like to lift
> her tongue, what it was like to lick her lips unstuck…Out of

> reach of her body. Her memory, cut loose. This, she thought, is what it feels like to be dead. (20)

On the other hand, a fugue can also be something that is made, a shape in which the artist can 'compose' the various threads of experience. Rather than those threads pulling against one another, leaving a chaos of abrasive discord, the fugue – through the labour of art – strives to bring them into a version of accord. In the musical form of the fugue, a central theme is sounded and repeated at different pitch, in different ways: it threads through the diversity of other notes, other experiences; it finds a way to hold change and continuity within a structure that acknowledges and therefore soothes.

'Eurydice. Eurydice. Eurydice.' Orpheus' words are themselves threaded through Hecq's own; they are the words of the poet whose art strives to call back the beloved from the other-world of death, almost able to create something so beautiful that the laws of the universe might roll back and allow the dead to return into our arms. By explicitly citing, indeed channelling the mythic poet Orpheus in his lament for his lost wife, Hecq acknowledges the immense possibilities as well as the limitations of art; her poetry offers the reader a fugue, so powerful and moving, we might just see the ghostly presence of the dead in the wings, shadowing us - memorialised, yet inevitably lost all over again.

In this collection, Hecq pushes at the structures and expectations of poetic language, creating a collage of varying techniques and voices. Some small sections are more conventionally lyrical, such as this bridging piece which stands alone, comfortless, on the whiteness of the page:

> The priest's words
> rise into the air
>
> The ground drops
> under my feet (19)

Other sections utilise a prose poetic which works to externalise a difficult emotional world into the chronology of narrative, thereby telling the story in a more conversational, apparently less self-conscious voice:

> Ours wasn't such a bad marriage. But it always felt as if someone had stolen my paintbox, leaving behind grey harmonies… And so, instead of wiping clean the smudge under the guttering of the suburbs, I dabbed at it again and again. (38)

In another section, again trying to come to grips with the implications, the 'why' of 'white' – the dead baby's face, the persistence of grief, the leaching of colour, the empty page – Hecq makes use of a concrete poetic in an attempt to break open the possibilities of every line, every word, every letter to speak her pain:

> Why is white white?
>
> An orchestra
> in a guitar
> colour cascades
> i
> n
> w

h
y
t
e

W
H
Y
t
e (16)

The plasticity of the poetic form become a way for Hecq to trouble the surface of expectations and to signal the conflicting elements of her experience. In this way, the collection forges a third space – a labour of art to accommodate the rough seam between a conflicted interiority and the external world and its stark requirements.

'Hush' say these poems. It is a mother's soothing word to her child – to the child who is lost yet still needs the envelope of her care, as well as to the other children, who, like her, must learn to negotiate the jagged hole left by death. 'Hush' is also reminiscent of the words offered to the poet herself, when, as grieving mother, comfort can often seem to ask us to put grief behind rather than finding ways to take it forward. In many ways, Hecq's poems break the silencing requirement of 'hush'; they take the reader on a harrowing journey through the persistence of grief and the exhausting work of mourning. However, in other ways, having spoken, having broken the taboo by continuing to articulate and explore the pain of loss, the poems are now able to offer another form of soothing that comes with an acceptance rather than a repression of such difficult emotional material. The fabric of this art reflects the diverse, often angular threads of life experience. More than just a mirror of course, the art of Hecq's poetic has the capacity to make another pattern from them, to shape them into a fugue which identifies the recurring and persistent themes, finding a way to blend them into the richness of the composition, the cathartic relief of its capacity to sound and to integrate darkness and light, despair and possibility.

Loss is forever: Hush.

*Rose Lucas is Senior Lecturer in the Graduate Research Centre, Victoria University. She is also a poet; her most recent collection* Unexpected Clearing *was published by UWA Publishing in 2016. Her next collection is* The Point of Seeing.

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**TEXT review**

# Outward-looking poetry: Michelle Cahill's *The Herring Lass*

## *review by Geoff Page*


Michelle Cahill
*The Herring Lass*
Arc Publications, Todmorden Lancs 2016
ISBN 9781910345764
Pb 77pp AUD17.00

It is instructive to compare Michelle Cahill's third collection, *The Herring Lass*, with her rather different second one, *Vishvarupa*. The latter was primarily concerned with Hindu religion and mythology, written from an 'outsider's', if slightly privileged, angle. Cahill (with Indian ancestry) was born in Kenya, grew up in England and moved to Sydney in her teens.

The poems in *Vishvarupa* were informative, sometimes playful, and generally fairly direct. In *The Herring Lass*, however, Cahill is more concerned with history, metaphoric energy and the symbolic function of weather. A clue may be found in her poem, 'Heptonstall', the place where Sylvia Plath is buried. Plath's name is not mentioned directly but her influence in this poem, and the collection more generally, is pervasive. 'The heavens rupture, bright above / the buttressed woods, stippled leaves initial // the sun's secrets in rose gold (30). Later in the poem, Cahill notes: 'The ash tree in the churchyard bleeds red berries / spilled and bruised, badly in need of cautery' (31).

It's interesting to compare these lines with a random excerpt from Plath herself: 'Inside the church, the saints will be all blue, / Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews, / Their hands stiff with holiness / The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild. / And the message of the yew tree is blackness — blackness and silence.' ('The Moon and the Yew Tree': Plath 1981: 172)

In both there is intense and dramatic energy but it's hard to avoid the impression that Plath's is the more focused and productive of a clear

result. It's worth noting too, more generally, that the intensity in Cahill's poems tends to come from injustices associated with unrestrained capitalism and imperialism where Plath's seems more often to stem from the conflicts in her own psyche (and, as she was keen to point out, their wider application to history and world events).

One of Cahill's undoubted strengths, however, is her talent for empathy. Two fine examples of it can be seen in the title poem, 'The Herring Lass' and in 'Bear'. The first situates Cahill's eponymous heroine in the midst of her exploitation: 'All day, men bustle in the courtyard, children stray. / A blacksmith smites metal, fishermen wait on a shilling, / whittle a stick along the wall, no word exchanged. // She tramps from port to port, from Crail to Pittenween. / The day unfinished, her children yet to be fed (11).

In 'Bear', on the other hand, Cahill speaks persuasively from the complex viewpoint of an embattled polar bear and easily overcomes the risk of anthropomorphism with lines such as: 'The Inuit know the fabric of my flesh, my pelt. / Our rule is eat or be killed, every tracker perseveres. / We are kin, forced onshore, it became a necessary / disruption, the quotas outdone, the ice melting' (28).

It is in poems such as these two, when the poet is clearly focussed on a particular subject's situation, that Cahill is at her most affecting. Strangely perhaps, some of the best poems in *The Herring Lass* are probably its most atypical. 'Taboo' is a good example. It's a blank verse sonnet which appears to detail an episode of street violence experienced by the poet (or her protagonist). The first three lines set up what some might see as a 'politically incorrect' situation these days i.e. giving the ethnicity of a perpetrator. 'After dinner he was bashed by an Islander / at Circular Quay, because I looked too fresh / and he was antique white, his hair receding' (62). The whole poem is a forceful demonstration how things don't always work in our deservedly-praised multicultural society. In fourteen lines with almost no rhetoric, Cahill gets straight to the point (and out again). When there is a 'poetic' touch, as in the last couplet, it helps the poem to resonate truthfully: 'That was my twisted shit; I guess we strayed / too close to the jetty sinking in the lapsed night' (62).

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*Geoff Page is a Canberra-based Australian poet who has published twenty-two collections of poetry as well as two novels, five verse novels and several other works including anthologies, translations and a biography of the jazz musician, Bernie McGann. His latest books are* PLEVNA: A Biography in Verse *(UWA Publishing 2016) and* Hard Horizons *(Pitt Street Poetry 2017).*

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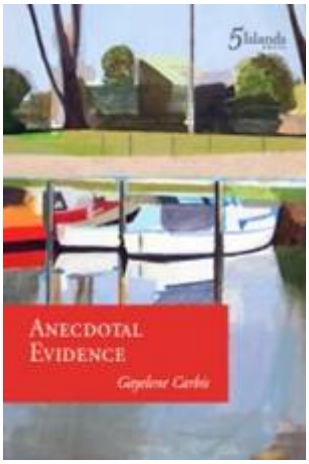
**TEXT review**

# ‘This is what happened’: Gayelene Carbis’ *Anecdotal Evidence*

## *review by Autumn Royal*




Gayelene Carbis
*Anecdotal Evidence*
Five Islands Press, Parkville VIC 2017
ISBN 9780734053602
Pb 86pp AUD25.00

Gayelene Carbis’ *Anecdotal Evidence* allows poetry to highlight and create contradictions within the binaristic understanding of ‘public’ and ‘personal’. To do so is essential for generating space for tender and vulnerable expressions we’re still unaccustomed to or discouraged from observing. One of the most daring features of Carbis’ poetry is her persistent emphasis on the lyrical ‘I’ in relation to memory. The ‘I’ or the persona within each poem expresses perspectives in such concentrated ways that there are no nostalgic curtains to hide behind. This is important because nostalgia – through its idealisation and longing – has the propensity to conceal and therefore silence.

For the purposes of this review I will consider Carbis’ use of the ‘I’ within the context of Dorothea Lasky’s essay ‘Poetry and The Metaphysical I’ (2015). In appreciation of Carbis’ poetics, I am actively inserting myself into this review which is a somewhat public act driven from a personal reading of Carbis’ *Anecdotal Evidence*. For how can *I* talk about the metaphysical *I* without investing an *I* myself? To continue, here is Lasky introducing her outline of the metaphysical *I*:

> I define this *I*, as a wild lyric *I*, one that has no center and has no way to predict where it will go. An *I* in a poem that is a shapeshifter. A persona that uses unexpected language and imagery, that is inconsistent, frightening, funny, and beyond the idea of a singular self. (Lasky 2015)

As Carbis states in the poem 'The Floods Come to Carnegie': 'I am always here. / Even when I'm not here' (62). Carbis is both inside and outside her poetry and she is unafraid to reveal how her words can enact a rage that may be symbolically destructive. This can be demonstrated in the condensed and commanding poem 'Fire':

> I stand like a statue
> in a big empty house.
>
> Solitary, still: I ignite.
>
> The house burns.
>
> These words are my ashes. (74)

This poem exposes the volatility of being subjected to the confines of conventions. It is no accident that what burns is a house: those supposed sanctuaries our entire existence is an obligation to. Consider the often mundane or painful things one has to do in order to 'keep a roof over one's head', something which should be considered a euphemism rather than an idiom.

In the poem 'Scrambled', Carbis employs the symbol of the egg to explore the abjection of returning to uncomfortable memories within dream states. The poem reads as if it is written out of fragmented memories and begins with a machine, a 'yellow crane, disturbingly surreal' (16). Then the 'dream shifts' (16) to a school day with the company of a friend called Adena; everyone 'squashed into / one small classroom' and all 'writing novels' (16.). Such lines allow Carbis to directly align the concept of memory with that of narrative and therefore the fictitious. In following this alignment, the poem quickly moves towards the violence of remembrance as the foundations of the classroom, and the memory of it, become demolished as well as excavated by the crane. It is Adena who warns: '*Run for your life! Get out of here*' (16) upon which all of the occupants 'scramble, like eggs, and [their] yolk / splatters out' (16). Carbis then exits from the sinking foundations and into the metapoetical. The poem rests on the hope that if the poet, the metaphysical *I*, can attach language to memory then they can find some form of restoration. The final lines read:

> through shaking sand
> along narrow passages:
>
> I believe I can go back in
> and get out, safe.
>
> With this poem. (17)

These concluding lines are active and bodily, to be safe inside the body of a poem, in the reading and thinking of it while in your own body. I wonder if perhaps this poem should have been placed at the beginning of the collection because that is what poetry is when read – a form of being.

I think that the most striking feature in this collection is Carbis' fearless use of the forward slash punctuation mark '/ ', an act I very much admire. The forward slash is not just a process of separating clauses or marking indicators for breath, it's also an action for Carbis to demonstrate that her poetry allows for movement. Carbis writes into the future through returning to the past, which we all know is often painful, difficult to articulate; full of gaps and perhaps crueller, doubts. Thus the forward slash

literally and figuratively allows for a roughly cut passageway into what was and what might be.

As well as cutting into the density of memory Carbis is able to paradoxically use the slash to indicate that of being haunted or confined. Note the beginning section of the poem 'Graven Images' in which the inescapability of familial connection in relation to a kind of 'life cycle' is stirred:

> My mother was born in Earl Street Windsor / and I was born in
> Earl Street Windsor / and my mother went to St Mary's in St Kilda
> and I went to St Mary's in St Kilda / and my mother idolised
> the nuns / and I idealised them / and my mother played Connie
> Francis / *The Bells of St Mary's* / *are here they are calling* / *the young*
> *loves the true loves* / singing with our stereo as she scrubbed
> the floors on her hands and knees / humming and singing and
> telling stories of how I could sing before I could speak…
> (20)

The lines in this poem are neither elongated nor sparse. Within these lines is a subtle and unsettling inbetweenness – which the forward slashes also suggest; meaning is in a state of suspension, *just* or *nearly*. This recalls the moment in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* when he examines photographs of his recently deceased mother, Henriette. The photographs present a history and alternate identities of Barthes' mother including her as a child. Barthes laments that he is only able to recognise his mother in 'fragments' (Barthes 2000: 65), isolating this experience as the '*almost*: love's dreadful regime' (66).

Within Carbis' own 'dreadful regime' the importance of 'testimony' is critical to acknowledge. Carbis' title gestures towards the vitality of subjectivity. A reader of this collection will recognise that Carbis is acutely aware of the unacceptable way in which many women's narratives have been 'held against them' often by seemingly innocent autobiographical readings. Carbis offers an inversion of this tendency with her eponymous poem 'Anecdotal Evidence'. The poem ends with the speaker of the poem asserting an empowerment in the act of self-representation with the lines: '…I keep a scrapbook as /evidence I am accumulating against them in case / they say I am crazy' (44). There is no full stop at the end of this poem, signalling towards the perception of unreliability that often accompanies a woman's self-expression, and as long as reactions like this continue, the work of Carbis' poetry remains unfinished. The poetry in this collection spans between the 'anecdotal' and the 'evidenced' and, given the prejudiced readings of women's writing, it calls for a new verdict rather than an expected one.

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**TEXT review**

# No fun on the dance floor

## *review by Jeremy Fisher OAM*


Paul Mitchell
*We. Are. Family.*
MidnightSun, Adelaide SA 2016
ISBN 9781925227109
Pb 276pp AUD24.99

*We. Are. Family*. The punctuation immediately calls to mind the Sister Sledge hit of 1979. Those full stops syncopate the disco rhythm. The song, composed by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, features the lyrics:

> no we don't get depressed
> Here's what we call our golden rule
> Have faith in you and the things you do
> You won't go wrong
> This is our family Jewel

I could not help wondering whether Paul Mitchell used the words for his title as an ironic reference to the disco song, because his family gets well and truly depressed and no member of it has any faith in any other member. Other music is mentioned, but it tends to be more heavy metal than disco, so perhaps there is no irony intended and there is very little display of it in this unrelenting tale of boys and their bad ways.

This is a book my mother wouldn't have liked; she preferred the books she read to tell 'nice' stories, which is why she was not partial to my writing. Mitchell's story is far from nice and, whether because I am nearly sixty-three or because I now live in constant pain, I found myself subscribing to my mother's point of view. I am ashamed to admit it, but I would not have finished reading this book had I not committed to reviewing it for *TEXT*.

That said, it is well-written, full of observational detail and in places quite poignant. This grim, bleak book covers three generations of the Stevensons, particularly examining the males of the family, though aunt

Sheree, mother Jules and Simon's wife Fiona are memorable characters. Mitchell details the family's rather unfulfilled lives from the 1960s to the present. He paints an unflattering portrait of the family. There were many times I did not want to persevere with reading, as doom followed gloom, but I persisted and was rewarded with more discomfort but also, finally, a resolution of sorts. However, throughout I despaired that there were almost no lasting relationships, that children appeared unwanted and unloved, that casual violence was more common than conversation. This is not a world I know, or understand, nor a world I want to know and understand. I accept that may be me piking out, that there are cruel and inhumane people who mistreat others, but as an old man in pain I don't want to read about them. Apologies, Paul Mitchell; it's not your fault your book met this grumpy old man on a bad day.

*We. Are. Family* may be hard going, but it demonstrates its author's dedication to the creative process. Possibly its uncompromising emphasis on masculine viewpoints and sensibilities is not palatable to many readers, myself included, in today's commercial publishing marketplace where feminine storylines, authors and readers dominate (despite being overlooked for literary prizes). Yet Mitchell has persisted with his storytelling over many years, developing the episodes and characters that make up his novel. The fact that sections of this book have appeared in literary journals and short story collections, as revealed in the acknowledgements (275), is testament to the fact that his writing is appreciated and valued, as it should be.

There is great variety here. Scenes of gritty urban homelessness build upon scenes of crocodile spotting on the Daintree River; tense domesticity is followed by a pub fight. Tension inexorably rises as Mitchell leads us to the revelation at the heart of this book, the family secret gnawing generations of Stevensons into unhappiness. Mitchell makes it very clear that Ron Stevenson was a tough father and husband and draws out the pain he inflicted on his sons Peter, Simon and Terry so that it is front and centre as the book reaches its conclusion. That it doesn't seem that significant is hidden in the complexity of the relationships between children and parents. We also discover that Ron and his sister Sheree, as children, witnessed their own violent father murder their mother. The relationship between the boys, now men Peter, Simon and Terry, fortunately strengthens and improves to provide some light at the end of this tale.

This is no waltz nor does the book permit the reader to get down and boogie. The flashing lights come from being thumped in the head rather than from disco balls but *We. Are. Family.* is a solid contribution to Australian masculine narratives.

While the writing is admirably concise and evocative, there is some unevenness in the narrative voice. Some details such as the death of Trevor Randall's son are repeated (241) unnecessarily. Generally the narrator is third person and tense is past. However while told through a third person, the section 'Peter and Ron Stevenson' (64-79) is present tense, and it is unclear why the tense change was thought needed. Perhaps that is because the book was written over an extended period, which allowed the author the freedom to develop its cyclic, or perhaps cyclonic, structure.

The cover, black, white and red, features an effective graphic of a hibiscus flower spraying blood; it's a neat concept from designer Kim Lock inspired by a description of paintings by Fiona, estranged wife of Simon Stevenson. Peter Stevenson, an artist, tells his mother Jules: 'The red

hibiscus means a woman's ready to be married' (152) but that does not shed any light on Fiona's paintings, nor explain the meaning behind the cover, which is nonetheless striking.

Overall the book has been treated with respect by the publisher MidnightSun, an Adelaide small press valiantly flying the flag for local literature, though there are occasional editorial glitches: anomalous American spellings occur, 'lightsabers' (73), 'skepticism' (78), 'organized' (265) and 'behavior' (270); and an apostrophe creeps into 'Arnie's' (141) when 'Arnies' was meant.

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