**TEXT Vol 20 No 2 (October 2016)**

## Reviews contents

**TEXT review**

# Mixing oil and water

## *review by Josie Arnold*


Jen Webb
*Researching Creative Writing*
The Professional and Higher Partnership/Frontinus, Suffolk UK 2015
ISBN 9781907076169 (ebook)
ISBN 9781907076350 (pdf)
ISBN 9781907076374 (hb)
Hb 282pp AUD235.00

Academic and imaginative writing can each be seen as creative and researched: this apparent tension is at the heart of Jen Webb's *Researching Creative Writing,* a book that provides tools for thinking about researchers in the academy who have creative practicum as well as scholarly abilities.

Initially, Webb shows how research is a way of making meaning that need not be seen as either creative or academic, but as having both elements. It is interesting that the carefully bounded assertion 'every writer – every maker of any kind of creative work – is a person who is involved, at some level, in research' is not matched with a similar assertion about academic researchers who have ontological imperatives. This introductory struggle to integrate writer-academics continues with what are sometimes rather conventional exemplars towards 'defining research'. Webb acts to resolve this dilemma by defining research as the ability to 'look intensively' and hence relevant to all writer-researchers.

The introductory tone that is established is one of considerable helpfulness as she continues to worry the differences between academic research protocols, creative writers' research and the contribution to knowledge of each. This normally understood discontinuity is signalled as the main through line of a book that is clearly meant for an audience of beginning scholars and creative writers: students and early career researcher-practitioners rather than established scholar-practitioners.

The initial proposition seems to be that creative and academic research and outcomes are not – and cannot be – complementary: one leads to fantasy, the other to scholarship. In what follows, Webb begins to consider each as an intrinsic element of scholarship. It is in 'bridging this divide' between creative and academic writing that *Researching Creative Writing* becomes of most interest. The discussion begins with an explanation of 'spontaneous sociology' as a form of scholarly investigation. A dichotomy develops in Webb's claim that the literary or creative writer's 'commitment is only to produce a creative work', whereas the researcher has multiple and seemingly more important issues to follow up on. It is the word 'only' allied with 'creative work' that I take issue with here, as, to some extent does the writer herself in the next section. It is difficult to propose this point and then try to reconcile it as knowledge production. If all knowledge production is a narrative, then are some narratives inevitably more scholarly than others because they conform to her frequent application of the 'Frascati manual' – prescriptive traditional academic guidelines for 'real' research?

Creativity is a significant element of human experience. It contributes to the health and the growth of the culture as well as that of the individual. In living our lives, each of us is called upon to be, both directly and indirectly, very creative. This is, paradoxically, discussed by Webb as an 'everyday creativity' that is neither celebrated nor recognised by the community because it is the common experience. She states that, whilst there are indeed many aspects of 'everyday creativity', in the dominant Western culture, the term 'creativity' is most usually applied to individual endeavours of a high degree of originality in, for example, music, the visual arts, writing and dance. Creative thinking is seen in the sciences, mathematics and industry, but these are generally not the immediate thought connected in our culture to 'creativity' itself.

This book struggles bravely – and very often fruitfully – with the current discontinuity between art and knowledge; between narratives that produce creative results and scholarly productions that produce 'real' research that contributes to knowledge. This is a difficult path to tread. For example the section on the construction of the research question enacts itself within the mythic representations of reality, so well described, for example, by Gayatri Spivak and Chinua Achebe, and which Eurowestern knowledge models embrace within the academy, whereas Webb seems to see it as emerging in a scholarly sense from logically determined pathways. This remains evident in the section on the literature review that alludes to 'high quality' and 'methodologically sound' refereed articles.

Given that this is a text for emerging scholars and practitioners, many of these attempts to clarify scholarship over creativity may be necessary. Certainly, axiological, epistemological and ontological concerns are complex and the attempts to define them are usually couched in given Eurowestern academic perspectives, practices and expectations, as they are here. In defining scholarship in this way, the book provides a primer for beginning research that is useful but may act to prevent new ways of knowledge production so that being an 'objective researcher' means eschewing 'magical thinking' to be 'serious' about research (65). Does it? Knowledge models such as Indigenous Standpoint Theory identify and illuminate other possibilities. For example, Lester Irabinna-Rigney and Dennis Foley in their discussion of Indigenous Standpoint Theory reject ongoing colonisation of knowledge within Eurowestern paradigms and propose other ways of knowing and doing scholarship.

Webb calls upon a wide range of readings and references in her discussions about conventional and creative research; her reflections, however, are too often limited by claims of accepted scholarly paradigms. Having said that, it is also evident that Webb struggles with this dichotomy and this work opens up some of its intrinsic problems. She endeavours to bring about some resolution whilst still paradoxically operating within the given conventions of scholarly research versus creative production. This is again evident in the discussion on research methodology, with the stale conversation about qualitative versus quantitative research being brought up yet again, and particular standards of validity and rigour being set as talisman yet again.

Writing itself is shown as both demanding and rich, and Webb aims to bring both elements forward as she discusses bringing together research writing and creative writing as 'synergistic', but 'not the same thing' (107). This claim becomes less certain when I turn it around: is it evident that research writing is not the same as creative writing? It is the same space, she concedes, but moved through differently so as to 'satisfy different gatekeepers' (113).

It is indeed academic gatekeeping that enforces certain research paradigms over others, and Webb discusses this fruitfully in the sections on 'research and other people' and 'research and the environment', showing both the usefulness and limitations of statistical sampling and certain theoretical perspectives.

The primer aspect of this text is evidenced when Webb discusses 'managing the material', and there is much here that is useful for the early career researcher and creative writer. I was particularly engaged by her axiom and her examples of the impossibility of editing your own work. This is another strength of this book: Webb never resiles from showing her own experiences in both their strengths and weaknesses. Her experiences are often summed up neatly and pithily such as: 'begin to publish once you have something to say' (206), and 'writing needs a reader' (213).

The book winds up with 'writing for academics' and this audience is the one primarily addressed in this publication. Whilst the dilemma between creative writing and academic writing remains unresolved it is duly considered, and Webb provides a very insightful and useful addition to discussions about practice within the academy.

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016 http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo**
**Reviews editor: Linda Weste**
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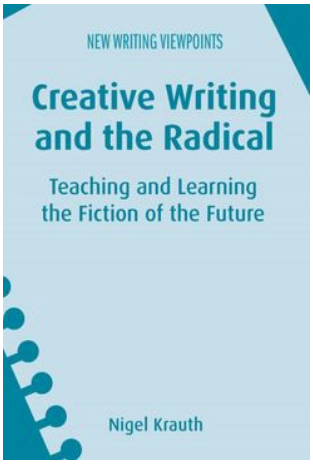
**TEXT review**

# Rehearsal, adaptation and flow

## *review by Moya Costello*




Nigel Krauth
*Creative Writing and the Radical:*
*Teaching and Learning the Fiction of the Future*
New Writing Viewpoints 13
Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK 2016
ISBN 9781783095926
Hb 240 pp GPB99.95

Nigel Krauth's interest in digital narrative was apparent from the first issue of *TEXT* in its inclusion of his article, 'Writing in Small Chunks?: Electronic Media and the Novelist' (1997). Following on that, also in *TEXT*, Krauth (2000) rethought creative writing's place in the academy, and, with Ross Watkins (2016), the writing of the scholarly article. He has now published *Creative Writing and the Radical*.

Krauth's concerns in this text are a spindle of threads. He names the contemporary as the time for a new kind of writing (1). His book is written for the writer, from the writer's point of view (3, 20). He gives an historical account of radical movements, and radical writing and publishing practices (3). For Krauth, 'the most important thing we can teach creative writing students is an understanding of the value of the exegetical – of the need for writers to examine, analyze and articulate their writing process in the context of the discourse provided by what other writers and critical thinkers are doing and saying' (205).

This historical coverage of *Creative Writing and the Radical* is comprehensive, and stimulating, and includes the Dada and Surrealist movements, to Eastgate's early hypertext publications and more. Krauth covers radical uses of language (such as Gertrude Stein's oeuvre), composition practices (such as collage, cut-ups, automatic writing, and constraints), publishing formats (such as the flipback® book and the app novel), and multiple media.

There is a curiously minimalist mention of Australian progenitors and practitioners of digital text. For the journal *TEXT*, which Krauth co-instigated and edits, has not ignored Australian projects, digital and experimental (see for example Zervos 2001; Costello 2005; Costello, Gibbs, Brooks and Prosser 2013). What comes to mind is the small, Australian, independent press Spineless Wonders which is producing print, ebooks, online supplements such as interviews, audio-visual outputs and performance – and VNS Matrix, Mez Breeze, Jenny Weight writing as geniwate@, Marion May Campbell, the sound poet Amanda Stewart, and various electronic text projects involving writers such as Linda Marie Walker. He does mention Komninos Zervos, and print-based writer Helen Garner's short story 'The Life of Art'. This latter is a model of nonlinear, fragmented text, for Krauth is very conscious of 'feminist ideas' seeking to 'dismantle old hegemonic structures and replace them with matrix-like' rhizomes (114).

Krauth sees radical creative-writing practice as a necessity. '[E]xperimental … styles … critique the limits of normative forms … by invoking the liberating and critical power of art' (Sullivan [2012] qtd on page 192). Krauth deploys the term 'radical', giving, as a rigorous scholar, the history of the term in chapter 1. Radical writing has 'innovation in mind' (2); the writer setting out 'to defy convention' and to call into question 'the accepted processes of writing and reading' (2). He carefully notes, though, that the radical is also about disqualifying oneself from 'popular acclaim and political approval' (5). But Krauth writes, too, of 'brave publishing houses' who have 'supported unconventional works' for their cultural rather than monetary value (40).

The 'radical', for Krauth, is not unproblematic, because ever-changing technologies make the radical seem everyday. But it is also problematic because in the early twenty-first century, wide-ranging influences also include the conservative neoliberal ideologies of late capitalism, which thrive on instantaneous commodification, neutralising the transformative capacity of the 'new' , and the pervasiveness of postmodern aesthetics which, likewise, make the new too familiar already. Nevertheless, stability, and assured success, notes Krauth (46), are inimical to the new – which ought to be about a process of ongoing becoming.

Towards the end of his book, Krauth gives an overview of his own course, Radical Fictions –which similarly maps onto the contents of his book. As in the SCU experimental writing unit that I teach, Writing from the Edge, students are challenged. '[T]hey … learn to break all the rules they've been taught in writing classes before' (205). Yet, in the end, my students say, as Krauth's do, 'they wish they had been allowed to do this course first, rather than last' (205).

One of the most important messages in his book is that Krauth sees the systemic structural issues in the academy as problematic for creative writing (19-20). He picks out English departments as stymying change in creative writing. This is not necessarily so. My PhD in creative writing was done in an Australian sandstone university's English department which had diversified not only into creative writing (ok, reluctantly) but also Media and Cultural Studies. My supervisor's specialty was the Early Modern, alongside which she was pursuing an interest in electronic literature. We currently have no English department at Southern Cross University: the creative writing program functions as this for Education students, future English teachers, who require literary studies, and because the SCU writing program believes writing students need to be readers.

Writing is traditionally seen, as Krauth notes, as an individual practice, though I have never seen it as this. Clearly, the multimodal requires collaborative production. Hence, Krauth predicts that creative writing in the future will be in multidisciplinary or multiarts sites in the academy (195).

Responses of discomfort to the experimental and multimodal are noted by Krauth: the stated pleasure of the silent, imaginative experience of print which is still part of our panoply. For discomfort, Krauth recommends 'negative capability', allowing yourself 'to be caught up in the rollercoaster ride' of the digital multimodal (39). And it may comfort detractors of the multimodal to know that publishers are aware that 'devices' are not 'content': they need authored works (183), and 'book professionals' are required to 'provide services' for any technology (187).

But at a time of great change in the literary industry, physical bookshops are sustaining themselves, while new ones are also opening (Sealy 2016). Ebooks are not making all that much profit for publishers and writers, while hard copies are still in demand (Takolander 2005). Writing by hand is still in focus (Bushak 2015).

Krauth quotes Jane Murray saying in 1997 that '[t]here are probably not two more difficult things to predict in this world than the future of art and the future of software' (197) – this is perhaps another reason to accept climate-change scientists' predictions for the future of the planet.

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**TEXT review**

# Bringing up baby: nurturing creative research in an academic context

## *review by Susan Taylor Suchy*


*Old and New, Tried and Untried:*
*Creativity and Research in the 21st Century*
Jeri Kroll, Andrew Melrose and Jen Webb (eds)
The Learner Book Imprint, Common Ground Publishing, Champaign IL
2016
ISBN 9781612298412
Pdf 176pp USD15.00

Born of a humanities colloquium in Madrid, *Old and New, Tried and Untried: Creativity and Research in the 21st Century* addresses the challenges of nurturing the creative disciplines in an educational environment that has come to require academic scholars and research outcomes from what was once a practical and craft-based atelier approach. The contributors are creative arts academics from Australia and the United Kingdom who have witnessed the changes in the educational landscape and who seek to address the relationship of creative practice to creative research. Importantly, the authors aim to clarify ways in which creative academics can most effectively work and how the work done by researchers in creative disciplines can be classified and valued.

Jen Webb and Paul Hetherington present a call for change in the opening chapter '"Research Active" vs "Practice Active": Re-imagining the Relationship between the Academy and the Creative Arts Sector'. In order to 'interrupt the dominant discourse', art for art's sake must be differentiated from art as research (11). They assert that 'it is not much more than a game of language that differentiates practice from research' (5). For example, most traditional types of research do not precisely fit with the Frascati or Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) guidelines of research anymore than arts research does (6). Webb and Hetherington object to the terms 'research equivalent' or 'practice active'. The terms are invalid and relegate the practitioner-researcher to an inferior status (7). Further, the dominant discourse supports a problematic worldview that

devalues significant and human aspects of research in all fields. The current, flawed view will not produce effective research because it ignores emergent aspects that allow for broader discovery that is not easily categorised by present narrow classifications. Webb and Hetherington recognise the need to value discovery, surprise, and imaginative work, and not just for those in the creative arts but also for all researchers in any field of practice, even if not every act of practice is research.

Other chapters also address the issue of the terms and language we use. Julian Meyrick, in '"Practice Active": Reconsidering Research Equivalence in Research Assessment Indices', presents a view of how the relationship between creative arts and tertiary education might be better managed (143). At the heart of the discussion is the term 'practice active' which Meyrick defines as 'individual academics being creatively active in research-equivalent areas defined by practice-based norms and practice-based assessments of the results' (145). He addresses Australian universities and encourages the view that staff must be actively practising in their industry in order to prepare students, and, importantly, that practice needs to be recognised and rewarded by the university even if not in the same way as traditional research.

The term 'collaboration' is addressed in 'Creativity, Research, and Practice Working Together: Collaborating with the Past, Present and Future'. Andrew Melrose draws from Lev Vygotsky's ideas on the self and other in relation to creativity, to move away from the 'Romantic' myth of the isolated writer and toward understanding the impact of the historical and cultural environment, and the artist's interdependence. By examining a wide range of creative works and creators' and critics' perspectives, he argues for new ways of looking at 'collaboration'. Melrose contends that cultivating new ways of looking at and talking about collaboration and interdependence will be helpful in elucidating the process of knowledge exchange that occurs between practice and research.

Many of the articles draw out the unique qualities of creative writing as part of a plan for helping creative writing in academia to adapt and change. For example, Jordan Williams offers useful strategies for dealing with the 'climate of accountability' that exists (21). In her chapter 'The Higher Degree by Research', she examines recent policy and research documents as well as issues of public criticism, in the UK and Australian context, to uncover the most significant accountability measures that need to be addressed. Then, by focusing on the unique qualities of creative writing, she draws out a range of tactics including: maintaining relevance for the discipline by encouraging work on the new forms of writing (such as web series, multimedia storytelling, and apps), and recruiting doctoral candidates for that purpose; developing additional new narrative forms (34); supporting multidisciplinary work and supervision (35); innovating approaches to the doctorate itself; and developing remote models in online and distance learning to extend the reach and diversity of doctorates (36).

Paul Munden also seeks out the unique qualities of creative writing. For example, in 'Writing and Education: The Value of Reconciling Teaching and Research', Munden argues that one value of creative writing is in increasing diversity, and he presents three ways in which this occurs. Munden also claims that research is a form of human activity that occurs at all levels, and regardless of a government's shortsighted actions, 'we should perhaps look forward to a new, subversive age of experiment, writing and research' (81). Munden calls for practitioner-teacher-researchers to understand their ways of knowing and to share that

understanding with the cultural industries and wider economy to demonstrate impact.

Ideas about sharing are also presented by Jeri Kroll in 'Researcher and Practitioner: A Refreshed Model of Supervision in Creative Writing Doctorates'. Kroll examines the terms 'research active' and 'practice active' to 'explore the challenges raised by hybrid degrees' (42). She considers how institutions can develop strategies for evaluating staff and their contributions to doctoral candidate supervision (56). She contextualises the challenge within the European, UK, and Australasian agendas and recognises the difficulties of supervision in meeting standards presented in government and stakeholder documents, for example the pressure to ensure that candidates of variable ages and backgrounds be 'career ready' (45). After presenting the qualities of an effective supervisor as: holding a relevant doctorate, having supervisory experience, and being 'research active', Kroll proposes that a shortage of well-qualified supervisors could be addressed with a 'refreshed model' – a supervisory panel or team, each with experience in different areas, who would address the range of skills the candidate needs to acquire as creative practitioner-researchers. A 'qualified' supervisor would lead the team. Among the benefits that Kroll describes of this shared workload approach is a situation that allows 'qualified' supervisors the ability to oversee more students and / or balance and fulfill research, teaching, and publication demands. Also the 'refreshed model' would provide students with more supervisory and mentorship experiences. Foregrounding this approach, as Kroll recommends, would help to gain recognition for the complexity of both supervision and training (57).

New methods for uniting research and creative practice are explored in some of the chapters, and two articles address the issue of replicable results. Sue Joseph's 'The Exegesis, Autoethnography and the Ethical Management of Enactive Practice' argues that the practice-led research model presents problems in terms of recognition and understanding by government funding agencies (107). Joseph seeks to specify the term 'enactive methodology within autoethnography' (110), an approach that she claims is analogous to a traditional scientific approach of offering replicable results (107). Drawing from Haseman's work in defining 'a third species of research', Joseph's research examines techniques in the practices of four research students who were conducting their own creative research into trauma narratives (111). Each case demonstrates how the creative writer might examine one's own experience as part of a research process. For example, one case considers writing within a scientific experiment. Another case examines an event by using writing techniques such as point of view. This second example involves writing about an experience in 1st person, interviewing or presenting the perspective of others (3rd person) who were also involved in the experience, and then analysing memories. Usefully, Joseph also takes the time to address issues of ethical conduct and presents some ways for protecting those working with traumatic memories.

Nigel McLoughlin also addresses the issue of replicable results in 'Being Gone: A Text World Analysis of Ambiguity in Eavan Boland's "Suburban Woman: A Detail"'. McLoughlin first provides a useful overview of Paul Werth's Text World Theory which emerged from Werth in the 80s and 90s (128). Next he pairs the approach with Peter Stockwell's cognitive model of literary resonance, that is, a way of examining 'attentional focus' on a particular world (129). The Text World Analysis approach can help writers consider where a reader's attention is focused and how subtle shifts occur

with linguistic cues and tropes. McLoughlin's analysis of Boland's work demonstrates this method of cognitive poetic analysis in action and its replicable nature.

In the 1938 screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby* there is a meeting of energies between the harried researcher who needs funding (Cary Grant) and the high-spirited Susan (Katharine Hepburn) and her pet leopard, Baby. At the end of the film, academic research and funding can't be without the wild creative spirit; but things are never going to be easy, and that describes the situation for creative disciplines and higher degree research. As Meyrick suggests, for creative arts to thrive in academia ongoing re-negotiation of the relationship is necessary (149). This book plays an important role in helping negotiate the terms for 'baby' to thrive.

*Susan Taylor Suchy is an author and academic working at the University of Western Australia. She is currently researching the relationship of the discipline of creative writing to the digital marketplace and how the creative writing student creates within that space.*

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**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
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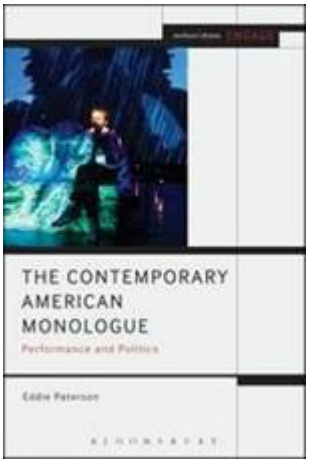
**TEXT review**

# ‘Monologuing performance’

## *review by Peta Tait*




Eddie Paterson
*The Contemporary American Monologue: Performance and Politics*
Methuen Drama Engage Series
Enoch Brater and Mark Taylor-Batty (eds)
Bloomsbury Methuen Drama Imprint, London 2015
ISBN 9781472585042
Pb 232pp AUD28.99

In succinct but comprehensive coverage, this engaging book offers the reader new perspectives on monologue. It sets out the origins and function of the dramatic monologue from historical precedents through to contemporary developments. The ambitious and largely successful ambit of the book means that it will appeal to theatre practitioners as well as researchers. Eddie Paterson presents the accepted ideas of theatrical monologue and then, in careful, thoughtful analysis, he explores how these were expanded through solo performance from the 1980s. Importantly, *The Contemporary American Monologue* treats monologue as a type of performance – and therefore best illustrated with the type of solo performance that emerged out of the United States.

Four in-depth case studies explain how monologues by leading artists came to be at the centre of recent provocative and political performance. I have seen each of the four artists perform live. I admire Spalding Gray’s verbal virtuosity, and I became a dedicated fan of Laurie Anderson, though a somewhat tentative viewer of Karen Finley’s sexually explicit art work. However, I found Anna Deavere Smith’s work extraordinary and her solo performances stand out in memory as remarkable. I have lectured on these artists in the past, and my students would have benefited from such a coherent and comprehensive resource as *The Contemporary American Monologue.*

This book traces the origins of late twentieth-century monologue as a genre with numerous components that draw from literature and drama (9).

In a trajectory from early drama, it updates the whole concept of monologue into the twenty-first century; the background about American oratory tradition is relevant to how solo performance monologue developed in the USA. The term 'post-monologue' indicates recent expansion and the political purpose of questioning dominant practices and institutions, and it usefully locates recent monologue in relation to other conceptual 'posts' (4). Monologue developed out of the narrative device of rhetorical delivery – and the multi-faceted Shakespearean soliloquy – to depict individuality, and modernist depictions of the conscious self in theatre. Then it evolved to present the experience of fragmented subjectivity (15). The theatrical monologue now has multiple variations.

Paterson finds that the post-monologues of the 1990s into the 2000s reflect contemporary performance rather than theatre in presenting personae within parodic and mediatised forms. He builds on the work of Deborah Geis explaining that such performance blurs the boundaries of biography and fiction as it makes marginalised identities and stories visible (9). But, as Paterson explains, there are also pragmatic reasons for the resurgence of the monologue form, to do with how artists need to make a living, funding shortages and other practical circumstances.

Although Paterson writes about the performance of monologues, the analysis still relies to some extent on the scripts of productions. One strand of commentary about the development of twentieth-century dramatic writing argues that the monologue is easier to write than dialogue. Monologue has been considered a less sophisticated technique in, for example, Chekhov's plays and he uses less monologue in his last plays. Perhaps issues arising from dramatic form have been sidelined by the short, cinematic dialogue of much contemporary theatre. Granted, direct address may better suit the writer-performer who can deliver the material with unique dynamic inflections.

The monologue of a performer-writer is often changeable text even though its delivery compounds its meaning (78). Spalding Gray performs a version of Spalding Gray and the insights about his work reveal the complex layering between autobiography and solo performance. They also encompass mental distress (60). Gray suggests that it is the awareness of extreme emotional capacity that assists his performance with parallels to depictions of madness. The monologue captures a sense of fragmented experience and points to the consequences of claiming truth (66). Paterson considers that Gray's works undermine the status quo through an ironic naivety; one performance seems to be a type of 'war therapy' for Gray. His later work exposes undercurrents of personal fear and dread, and fear for the nation, in a happy (American) life.

Laurie Anderson is the most internationally well known of the case studies, because her work critiques mass-media culture. She is an accomplished performer-writer-musician who was an early adopter of electronic technology. Anderson's performance might not be conceived of as monologue but it corresponds with Paterson's revised definition and particularly her use of found text. Her cyborgian voice and ambiguous gender conveys depersonalisation, and at times in a sardonic tone. Paterson's analysis is strong in its explanation of Anderson's capacity to reveal American militarisation following up on her purpose of providing an 'off shore' view of the USA (82).

Anna Deavere Smith is an Afro-American performer who can transform herself into a white policeman or a Korean shop owner or an American

President. As many as thirty identities can appear in one of her solo shows, through her physical versatility and capacity for mimicry. This creates some of the most extraordinary work that I have ever seen. In particular it disturbs the premise of embodied identity itself. Deavere Smith creates carefully crafted texts composed from verbatim interviews, often around major conflicts, and then performs as each of the people whom she interviewed. The text can be considered a form of verbatim theatre or documentary theatre. While it is definitely performed by Deavere Smith as monologue, the scripts have multiple identities and I have seen one script performed by a group of young actors.

The ethics of Deavere Smith's performance are complex, in what is termed here as '*curated* diversity' (112–13). The ideological positioning is implicit, as Deavere Smith appears to simply present a diverse group of people in a seamless way although she has carefully selected and crafted the interview materials. While Paterson's competent analysis of technical and conceptual meaning is valuable, the sheer epic scale of Deavere Smith's art work is not easily contained by ideas of monologue as her brilliant mimicry underpins these scripts as solo performance. The live show adds a dimension that Paterson might not have fully captured in his respectful commentary. The spectator sees Deavere Smith but hears other people and sees their facial and gestural habits in an uncanny disturbance of assumptions about the physical containment of race and gender. Her work upsets the whole concept of embodied difference and can be confronting for spectators; I have sat next to Afro-American spectators who were uncomfortable with this process. There are a panoramic range of views, so there is no clear morally right or wrong position. Yet there is something immensely powerful about how one physical presence can speak as these polarised identities and embody them so that such fluidity means that the power to control others seems diminished.

Karen Finley's capacity to shock is not in doubt and there is a weighty political strategy in her confrontational and parodic style; she is also a visual artist. As Paterson points out, her use of blasphemy and humour uses bad taste to effect a radical politic. I was familiar with her early work and I was interested to read about more recent work, including *The Passion of Terri Schiavo* in 2005. This is based on media coverage of actual events arising from family and medical decisions around a woman who was in a coma, Terri Schiavo. If Finley is mocking the media and reality TV, it is also necessary to make very clear that this is her purpose in order to justify what happens in her show (152).

Ultimately Paterson locates recent innovative monologue within post-dramatic performance. Whether it stands alone as each case study illustrates, or it is one aspect of a text about a fragmented world, monologue remains prominent and is increasingly widespread. The possibilities of the monologue form are evident in the way it is inspiring a new generation of artists, including Australians. I look forward to the sequel of this very good volume.

*Professor Peta Tait, La Trobe University, is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Her recent books include:* Fighting Nature: Travelling Menageries, Animal Acts and War Shows *(Sydney University Press 2016) and the co-edited* The Routledge Circus Studies Reader *(Routledge 2016) and her most recent play is* Eleanor and Mary Alice *about Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary Alice Evatt.*

**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
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**text@textjournal.com.au**

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# Salvaging meaning

## *review by Lyn McCredden*


A Frances Johnson
*Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage:*
*Making and Unmaking the Postcolonial Novel*
Cross/Cultures Series 187
Brill, Leiden, Netherlands 2015
ISBN 9789004309975 (hb)
ISBN 9789004311671 (ebook)
Hb 320pp AUD294.99

As A Frances Johnson admirably demonstrates in her critical monograph *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage: Making and Unmaking the Postcolonial Novel,* there are multiple gangs in the literary world, and each has a stake in that space; novelists, theorists, critics, archivists, postmodernists, parodists, metafictionists, and historians of varying denominations.

Writing from an historical novelist's perspective, Johnson does great service in bringing to the reading and writing public a range of layered, knotty ideas. Depending on whether you share Johnson's particular concerns (those of an historical novelist willing to take on the big, writerly, theoretical issues about the past and the present), or adjacent interests (postcolonial theorists and literary critics, historians, readers not writers of fiction) you may have differing responses to *Archival Salvage.* You will be engaged by this book's probing of craft, history and theory, especially if you are a writer.

*Archival Salvage* works through reference to leading Australian fiction such as Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Dead Man Dance*; Kate Grenville's *Joan Makes History* and *The Secret River* trilogy, and other novelists such as Mudrooroo, Thomas Keneally, Peter Carey, Robert Drewe, Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan. Detailed and interesting discussion of these writers' fictions are spliced with close reference to Johnson's own novel of 2007, *Eugene's Falls.* There is much to be learned in these discussions,

particularly in regard to writing techniques, strategies, and effects. Johnson is a keen advocate of postmodern techniques (metafiction and intertextuality, parody, heteroglossic code switching and juxtaposing, non-linear developments of plot, multiple characterisations, from cipher to realist) and *Archival Salvage* offers fascinating readings of Australian history novels and the ways their authors adopt appropriate postmodern strategies in order to open out Australia's many-voiced, unsettled history.

Unsettlement and the still-volatile territory of Indigenous and white settler Australian relations is the ongoing historical bass note in this volume, as it must be when considering Australian postcolonial literary debates and realities. In order to re-open these debates (hatched during the so-called history wars of the early 2000s) among history novel writers, historians and postcolonial and postmodern literary theorists, Johnson turns preeminently to the novelists and their practices, and to influential postmodern theorists Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin. Johnson is convincing in her detailed discussions of the appropriateness of heteroglossia and parody as novelistic tools in representing Australia's many-voiced, disjunctive, postcolonial history. This is history of the Greg Dening kind, open-eyed to both the weight of the archive, but also to the role of the imagination and fictive strategies in any understanding of what happens when vastly different worlds, languages and races collide. Johnson remains admirably open to the *différends* of history: histories simultaneously of victims, colonisers, and those in between, who turned to both violence and care, dominance and empathy.

Following Kristeva, Johnson gives us palpable examples of the ways in which political and archival language and power inevitably must bow to the fictive imagination, how the 'archive event', such as the Parliament of Australia's Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, is made to 'perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation. For it is this *eminently parodic* gesture that changes the system' (Kristeva, from 'The Ethics of Linguistics', 236). Johnson here is, of course, on the side of the angels / novelists, and she enlists her powers of persuasion, writerly detail and know-how, to show us other histories, other voices and the contributions of writers of fiction.

There is a certain kind of intellectual courage demonstrated in *Archival Salvage*, which does not quake in discussing Mudrooroo, Kate Grenville, Kim Scott, Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan, all addressed in terms of novelistic techniques and what they have to offer in understanding history and our contemporary state of postcoloniality. Such techniques do not disappear under the weight of various critical assaults, but are prioritised as writing – writing valued as a true, expansive source of meaning and understanding.

As a member of an adjacent literary gang, literary criticism, I want to ask some questions in the call and response mode of heteroglossia championed by Johnson. First, while part of me leans with admiration towards the writerly gang, another part must ask: in all the wonderful writerly cacophony of Kim Scott's *Benang*, so rightly admired as exemplar by Johnson, what do readers (and history, and Australia) finally make of all the 'proliferation and confusion of meaning' (260)? Johnson would have us believe (and perhaps I almost do) that 'as these sign-systems rise and fall against one another, the "abandonment" of former (colonial) sign-systems occurs: namely, those forming racist, romantic, and anthropological discourses of Aboriginality' (260). Is that why Pauline

Hanson in 2016 has turned (briefly) away from Aborigines to Muslims in her racist discourse, I ask, archly.

Second call: in championing the many writerly, postmodern, code-breaking techniques – 'parody, montage, historiographic metafiction, allegory, and fabulism' – is there not something worrying (unbelievable?) about Johnson's faith in these writers who 'seek to do metaphorical violence to the myth of an orderly, thick-walled institutional archive, to the tidying of official histories … [to] evoke the heterogeneity of past time' (261)? There is nothing wrong with this desire, but how reliant on polarities – in cultural and writerly terms – and the oft-voiced dichotomies of writerly aparatchiks and archival gulagists is such a discourse? To be fair, this is not the predominant tenor of Johnson's book, which remains open and flexible in its championing of writing in relation to history and ideology. But as Bakhtin scholar Graham Roberts, quoted by Johnson (33), reminds us, 'every utterance contains within it the trace of other utterances, both in the past and in the future.' Parody as reliant on what it parodies?

My final call to Johnson is in terms of the historical depth of the postcolonial theory she deploys. While applauding Grenville's postmodern strategies, Johnson argues that they are what 'enable her to leap past the more politically correct postcolonial debates raging across Australian literary circles in the 1980s and 1990s' (12). Further, Grenville's 'humorous, polyphonic burlesque … went largely undiscussed (in relation to *Joan Makes History*), because '…in a Bicentennial and post-Bicentennial climate of feverish postcolonial academic debate … [a] mood of political correctness began to impinge upon academic theorizings of Indigenous identity-politics and postcolonial theorizings of otherness' (12-13). I'm afraid, as a member of another gang (not Historian, not novelist) I must protest at this truncating of literary and intellectual history. Johnson is talking about a period in which Australian postcolonial theory and criticism came to birth, and made (as it continues to do) a major and diverse set of contributions to postcolonial thinking, including around Indigenous and settler relations. There is a dearth of references to this theory in *Archival Salvage,* and what *is* mentioned certainly plays a minor role, in relation to the emphasis placed on (later) novel writing. However, if the important work of Australian postcolonial literary theorists such as Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, Gareth Griffiths, Adam Shoemaker, Stephen Muecke, Helen Gilbert, Anne Maxwell, and others, all writing across the 80s and 90s, is to be only cited in passing (for undoubtedly interesting references to Bakhtin and Kristeva), a certain cultural cringe may still be operative. The 80s and 90s, as these Australian theorists were aware, gave rise to crucial debates about Australia and its cultural and intellectual production (such as academic conferences ofThe Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and its rowdy Australian interlocutors facing down the empire). A little more communication between the writing and the theory gangs would have addressed some of the gaps in theoretical and historical awareness in *Archival Salvage.*

That said, this is a groundbreaking work, embracing the various literary and historical gangs, provoking questions about our differences, and our mutuality. The Humanities in Australia is in dire need of such coming together in 2016.

*Professor Lyn McCredden leads the academic group Writing and Literature at Deakin University. She is a literary critic who has written a number of critical monographs, including* Bridgings: Reading Australian Women's Poetry*,* Luminous Moments: the Contemporary Sacred*, and* Intimate Horizons: the Postcolonial Sacred in Australia*. Her forthcoming critical monograph,* Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred*, is forthcoming from Sydney University Press in 2016.*

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**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
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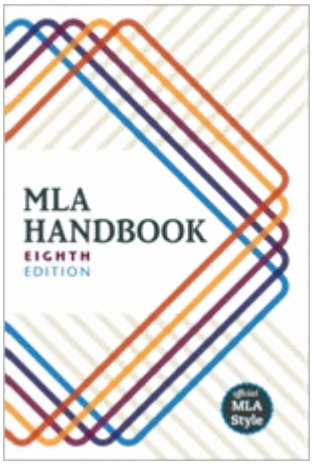
# Flexible frameworks for 'unruly' formats

## *review by Roslyn Petelin*




*MLA Handbook Eighth Edition*
The Modern Language Association, NY USA 2016
ISBN 9781603292627
Pb 160pp USD12.00

In a recent article in the *LA Review of Books,* Kathleen Fitzpatrick, the current Director of Scholarly Communication at the Modern Language Association (MLA) in New York, lists the most 'unruly' format request that her office had received up to that point: how to cite 'a book that a player reads within the action of a video game' (Fitzpatrick 2016). For several years, the MLA office had constantly received questions about how to document new genres such as a tweet, an Instagram image, an e-mail message, a YouTube video, a blog post, a DVD, an e-book, and so on. These requests about how to cite new textual formats galvanised the venerable MLA (founded in 1883) to prepare the 8th edition of its handbook, which at 146 pages is exactly half the size of the 2009 292-page 7th edition.

The MLA had realised that it needed to replace its prescriptive list of citation formats for 'each kind of source', as set out in the 7th and earlier editions, with a universal and flexible documentation framework comprising core elements (with punctuation supplied) that could be applied to all the kinds of texts arising from the ever-changing digital environment.

MLA in-text citation style has traditionally been based on an author-title format, unlike the author-date format in place in *TEXT* journal. The new handbook, published mid-way through 2016, is in two parts: the principles, followed by the details. A template is included at the end that lists the core elements of texts: author/s; title of source; title of container (book [of essays, short stories, poems, etc.], periodical, television series, Web site); other contributors (those who adapt, edit, direct, illustrate, introduce, perform, and translate); version; number; publisher; publication

date; and location. The handbook features lots of illustrations of the filled-in template. The website, style.mla.org, also contains the template and other helpful information.

MLA's aim was to eliminate the requests for updated formatting instructions that its office received when new modes of publication were 'invented, combined, and modified', while providing writers of academic documents with guidance about how to create comprehensible and reliable references to their research – the core principle of academic writing.

Fitzpatrick's preface addresses the speculation, expressed most widely by Tim Parks, the British novelist and translator, that search engines and full-text databases on the Internet have rendered source information 'superfluous'. While Fitzpatrick accepts that 'scholarly documentation has over decades acquired increasingly complex rules and formats', she claims that scholars' 'increasing use of tools and resources ... makes the inclusion of a reliable data trail for future searchers even more important' (ix). She goes on to emphasise 'the increasing mobility' of 'locations and formats of texts', so that the reasons for documenting sources and 'scholarly conversation' in the academy extend 'beyond simply giving generic credit from which a quotation or other borrowing was derived' (x). In discussing whether citations could be done away with, as Parks suggests, she mentions the varying degrees of reliability and precision that editions and translations exhibit: 'their very malleability may heighten the importance for future scholars of knowing precisely which version today's researcher consulted' (2016).

In presenting its new framework for citation practices, Fitzpatrick states that the MLA 'took the opportunity to put all the rules aside and imagine how we'd create an entirely new style today, from the ground up ... establish a set of principles that provides a flexibility that works with rather than against writers' (2016).

For 133 years, the MLA has led humanities scholarship and publication, so it's good to see it leading the way with the shift that the 8th edition of *The MLA Handbook* represents in accommodating genres published on new digital platforms, though I think that the claim that it has created 'an entirely new style' would be regarded as somewhat hyperbolic by experienced academics. The most valuable location for the handbook will be in the hands of humanities students new to the academy. And the most valuable part of the handbook for them will be the template. It will be interesting to see whether the American Psychological Association (APA) follows MLA's lead by developing a template to guide scholars using APA style (or its offshoot, Harvard style, as used in *TEXT* journal articles).

It's a pity that, in their future-proofed re-working of prescriptive rules that this handbook represents, the MLA still hyphenates 'e-mail', still capitalises 'Website' and 'Internet', and still has not adopted the singular 'they' – a convention which Australia has widely and happily used for more than 30 years. Perhaps the promise made in the foreword by Rosemary Feal, Executive Director of the MLA, in describing the shift as 'one of our greatest shifts ever' to make further changes to accommodate new media in further iterations of the handbook will also include changes to their conservative style.

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*Associate Professor Roslyn Petelin designed and initiated the award-winning postgraduate Program in Writing, Editing, and Publishing at the University of Queensland, and developed the hugely successful international* WRITE101X English Grammar and Style*, an edX MOOC, which has attracted more than 300,000 registrants to date. She edited the* Australian Journal of Communication *from 1988-2013, is co-author of* The Professional Writing Guide and Professional Communication*, and consults internationally to government and other organisations on writing, editing, and information design. Her latest book is* How Writing Works*, published in October 2016 by Allen & Unwin.*

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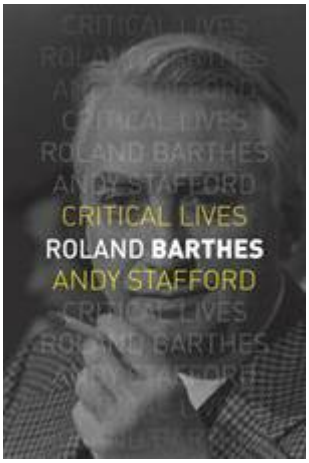
# Forced to be honest

## *review by Rhonda Dredge*




Andy Stafford
*Roland Barthes*
Critical Lives Series
Reaktion Books, London UK 2015
ISBN 9781780234953
Pb 192pp GBP11.99

Andy Stafford concludes his critical life of Roland Barthes by placing his subject firmly in the tradition of French essayists. Just one of Barthes's publications was written as a book, the rest being academic essays, teaching notes or plans for longer works published or re-released in book form. How does this method of working sit with creative writers who have become interested in the French theorist through questions raised by their own practices?

Barthes has been a friendly guide for many creative writers looking for inspiration in the academic archive. Compared to other sources, he is cheeky, irreverent, polemical, intimate and sometimes deeply technical. A disciple of Barthes can follow trails of thinking through the theorist's published work leading back to major breakthroughs in the study of narrative. From Barthes we have the language of coded responses that signify at a level grasped only by initiates. He is our guide to the closed world of French semiotics.

Stafford does a good job of normalising the intellectual milieu of post-war France. At first we see Barthes off at regional posts, often a round peg in a square hole. His study has been broken by illness and his mentors are strictly archival. Writing was to become the pivotal concern of Barthes's life, a retreat into a less demeaning place than the world at large. Friends would come to the rescue, however, and find him academic positions that suited his style.

Everyone wants a literary soul mate and Barthes is the universal donor. Those looking for structure in their own projects need only read *S/Z* for a brilliant abstract formulation of text. Those seeking ways of negotiating binaries in language find sustenance in *The Neutral*. Stafford finds similarities between Barthes's early respect for the history of writing theory and the need for a writer to be read with love. He, also like Barthes, never dwells for too long in the one place.

The political cauldron of the 1960s sees Barthes busily inventing an antidote for structuralism. Students are calling for its downfall. They are writing anti-structuralist slogans on Parisian walls. They are siding with Sartre and the alienated self. Barthes is too cautious, too abstract, too … binary. His biographer Marie Penn has called him an oscillator. Stafford concurs, at least in Barthes's later work. Early on Barthes was more careful about the intrusion of self.

Was the 1960s uprising a staging point for Barthes's later career? He had just delivered an analysis of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine* to a workshop at the Collège de France. In that analysis he had labelled parts of the narrative, not just in terms of codes, but in relation to specific rhetorical ploys. One ploy was the feint, a manoeuvre that involves a blow to the head while the narrator attempts to manipulate the heart. Narrators do not tend to like the limelight for this reason. They prefer to tap into what is bubbling underneath. What would Roland Barthes have said about the spotlight still shining down on his desk in the second century 'AB'?

In *S/Z* Barthes demonstrates how an interdiegetic narrator spins out his tale until the end when he denotes the underlying truth. Barthes used this analysis to show how a complex system of codes can be employed to delay resolution. He compares the pattern of codes or voices to a fugue. *S/Z* is a brilliant simulation of storytelling with plenty of tips for the creative writer. It purports to support Barthes's ideas about the role of the reader in creating meaning yet he uses it as a bedding ground for his later work on fragments and the polyvocal text. In other words *S/Z* flatters the reader while providing tips for the writer. It is a clever piece that implies that the value of a text lies in what is repressed.

Stafford adopts the position of feint in his study by describing in detail the mechanisms by which Barthes disseminated his ideas. A likely corollary of his finding is that Barthes was more of a conversationalist than a narrator. Conversationalists are more interested in exchange rates than return on their investment. In other words, he privileged *parole* over the system of language he so assiduously mapped.

What, then, is repressed in Stafford's tale about Barthes? He has had the benefit of being able to draw on a recent biography by Marie Penn. There are allusions in his book to Barthes's homosexuality, passages dealing with his maternal attachment and some passing criticism by Barthes's contemporaries of his promiscuity. Barthes's membership of editorial committees gets a mention as does his loneliness after his mother's death and his tendency to oscillate. What then is the colourful truth that might be revealed in the last line?

It seems churlish to quote from an author's discoveries without travelling the journey through a text. Many have done this to Barthes's own work, finding aphorisms about the fascism of language or other snippets worthy of quoting. Writers deal with difficult truths and this is where a limitation may be found. Barthes and his post-structuralist compatriots were opposed

to the representational qualities of narrative. It was all one simulation after another in their reading of writing. Stafford nails this tendency without making a judgment. 'It is tempting therefore to say, with all the distance of the self and in parody of Marx's *mot* that Barthes is not a Barthesian' (159).

Readers will have to create their own journeys by linking clues in Stafford's 'Roland Barthes' to get at the complete gist of this final word. Suffice to say that parody is always a remake and even though Barthes often comes across as amusing, irreverent, wise, modest and even fresh, he is never sincere. He never really means what he says or says what he means.

You could say that this is quite a tough reading of Barthes. At first Stafford's book could be a little disappointing. You are hoping for something to sink your teeth into, some emotional content still undigested. But Barthes lived language. He believed, according to Stafford, that it had more social value than a reader. This is a powerful and heartening suggestion for the creative writer yet, as *S/Z* demonstrates, truth becomes never more than a textual strategy. In the end this leaves no real place for the reader whose only option is to go out and apply some of the great theorist's principles herself. At the back of the reader's mind is the suspicion that Barthes was a political animal adept at harnessing the power of binaries to find gravy trains. Then you turn up at a conference and you are the Barthesian, staying aloof, recording details, building narratives and you are forced to be honest – to give up being a Barthesian is to give up narrative. You stay close to your material and let it dictate your next move. That's when you realise there is no limitation to Barthes. Stafford couldn't find one and neither can you.

*Rhonda Dredge has a PhD in Creative Writing from La Trobe University. She writes a monthly critical column for* CBD News*, tutors students on narrative for EduKingdom and is completing her novel,* The Mutant Scholar*, on the impact of the Metro Rail project on the Flinders Quarter in the city.*

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# Roman holiday

## *review by Dennis Haskell*


Kevin Brophy
*This is What Gives Us Time*
Gloria SMH, Melbourne Vic 2016
Pb 94pp AUD25.00

Kevin Brophy's *This is What Gives Us Time* is the product of his residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome, and is a fine testament to Lori Whiting's generosity in donating the apartment for use by Australian writers and the Australia Council's efficient management of the Fellowship. The book includes one poem set at BR Whiting's grave ('Grave keeping' 14) and one section of the final poem concerns his wife's planning a final sailing on her yacht at the age of 90 (although she is not named). Both poems convey a sense of gratitude and respect without becoming obsequious or sentimental; this is not easy to do, and points to Brophy's commanding emotional poise throughout the book.

At the end of the sailing poem, 'Her thoughts will be of finding her way / through rocks and channels to the safety of harbour and bay' (78). These are his thoughts of her thoughts, and the poem has a good deal in common with Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar'. Both poems deal with impending journeys, one which we will all have to take. At the end of the poem 'Sightings' Brophy declares:

> Our souls are the dim lights on boats that fish for calamari
> on the sea
> At night: vague, far out, glowing like creatures slowly
> filling with luminous ink. (67)

It takes courage to use the word 'souls' but the Eternal City prompts it and the phosphorescent squid are symbols of Brophy's own fishing for illumination, with inky lines rather than nets.

Considering that the book is written from Rome and that Brophy usually lives in Melbourne, the book is remarkably full of water – in the sea, the Tiber, and the rain. The first poem, 'The drowned world' (its title taken from a JG Ballard novel which provides the book's epigraph) states: 'The surface of the mind is permeable under the swirling suggestion of water' (1). Not just the surface, the book suggests. Permeability, attempted interactions between the mind and the external world of a city being newly discovered, is one feature and indeed one implicit theme of *This is What Gives Us Time*. The contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum has led the philosophical argument, contra Plato, for the need to integrate thought and emotion and 'to have a kind of openness to the world' (Nussbaum qtd in Aviv 2016). One might say that Keats knew all this, but it is important to recognise that Brophy's poetry everywhere exhibits both characteristics.

Water is fluid but stone and marble, and a city's buildings, are fixed – relatively. They seem even more solid than earth, and all three elements are threaded through Brophy's book while he seeks verbal meanings to set against his own and others' transience. Everywhere he carries an awaremenss that we *are* given time, but only a limited amount of it, a fact that is life's greatest irony. The poem which gives the book its title ('Elena!') begins, 'We are building the ruins' (3). 'Every different death is death' ('A bunch of flowers, a wallet' 7): death is the one absolute. Time is wonderful but it is also 'a slow inhuman shade of silence' ('Hours' 11).

Thus, Brophy is very aware of the statues of God or of the gods that are plentiful in Rome, and of what they represent: the urge for permanence and for a purpose to our lives. Brophy at his most urgent feels the need of 'something like redemption' (22). The poem from which this statement is taken, 'How we made it through a whole day (again)', posits its everyday language against past representations of the ideal, ending:

> At night electric haloes on the heads of saints
> burn prayers into the sizzling air, dissolving all complaints.
>
> Their holy marble gestures are more eloquent than words:
> we could never say what they have not already heard. (23)

A part of the poet admires the aspiration embodied in the statues of the saints and partly admires the confidence that created them, but such confidence is not available to contemporary humans and in the end the lines must be read as ironic. 'We fear… / all things that fix' ('To the Statues' 59) and Brophy's is ultimately a poetry of questions: 'Where does this intensity arise – in us or in the world?' ('Coming to the end of winter at Easter' 45) 'If a perfect net of light was pulled through the sea along the shoreline / What fish would tumble into it...?' ('Mediterranean Sea' 56)

In case all this sounds too ardent it is good to meet the moments of humour. Brophy's father writes 'With an organised and disciplined, "Firstly": / Letting me know, firstly, that the postcards / Have been arriving… / I've sent them Popes, some nuns, but mostly ruins' (Firstly 58) Advice especially to poets: 'Do not be so joyful, your mental health will be questioned' ('Negatives not to live by' 52). The poet, who does not speak Italian, finds:

> The new cordless phone has instructions in Italian on how
> to set it to another
> Language. It rings in English now but still speaks to me in
> Italian ('Sightings' 66)

To seek large meanings in a city with as grand and long a history as Rome's seems apt but occasionally lines slip over into preciousness: 'If tomorrow does come it will be in sorrow' ('The mystery of proverbs' 44); 'What is the ocean if it is not a god?' Well, probably an ocean. This is from the last poem, 'Oceanus', which seems faux-naif throughout. Personification is the most difficult of all tropes to make work in contemporary poetry and few of those in *This is What Gives Us Time* seem convincing.

For the most part, though, Brophy's imagery is vivid and it is always interesting – 'the river and its bridges like gypsy bracelets / along its arm' ('Sand and cinder' 50). 'A visit to the convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary' (61), for instance, shows respect for the nuns' religious belief, but, subtly, the whole poem is governed by its first word, 'If'. Brophy respects any serious effort to express the human soul – through prayers, poetry, solitude or jokes. Almost everywhere the book evidences his poised intelligence, as he considers 'our lack of pedestals and artistry, us / with our light-filled liquid eyes' ('To the Statues' 59).

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*Dennis Haskell is the author of 8 collections of poetry, the most recent* Ahead of Us*, (Fremantle Press, March 2016) and 14 volumes of poetry anthologies, literary scholarship and criticism. He is currently Chair of writingWA. In 2015 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for 'services to literature, particularly poetry'. He wishes it to be noted that he is a friend of Kevin Brophy.*

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**TEXT review**

# ‘Other points of view’: Hazel Smith’s *Word Migrants*

## *review by Jessica Wilkinson*


Hazel Smith
*Word Migrants*
Giramondo, Artarmon NSW 2016
ISBN 9781925336030
Pb 120pp AUD24.00

The cover of Hazel Smith’s *Word Migrants* shows an image of Sieglinde Karl-Spence’s wearable artwork, ‘Veil of Mourning’ (1989), draped over a dummy bust. The head and face are almost completely obscured by driftwood ‘hair’, with a little bit of nose poking through. I’m a strong believer in the power of a good cover – that when an artwork has been selected, it ought to respond to or suggest something to come from within the book itself. While the title of the artwork refers to mourning, this image also suggests a woman hidden, or hiding. It is difficult to view the artwork’s gathering of driftwood, in a contemporary climate, without thinking of ecological matters. There is also something playful in the way this ‘veil’ has been constructed.

There are strong connections between the cover image and Smith’s poems, with the above themes and ideas appearing throughout the book as the poet addresses loss, violence, current political issues (including climate change and sexism), and also experiments with language and form. The titles of the five sections – ‘The Forgiveness Website’, ‘The Poetics of Discomfort’, ‘Mismatch’, ‘The Shivers from Analogy’, and ‘Erasures’ – give us the immediate impression that this will be a melancholy collection, although on progressing through the book we discover that this is far from the dominant mood.

To begin with, the opening poem ‘The Disappeared’ is a prose poem mourning the loss of someone close, a loss that leads the narrator to observe disappearance everywhere:

> Once you dissolved, the disappeared kept gathering. They came from all over the world. They stacked up in the doorway and the driveway, and hummed fragments of your compositions.
>
> It put an end to grieving. For the first time I understood the low tones you bequeathed me. (4)

The dedication of the book to the author's deceased mother may reveal the 'you' who has 'disappeared' in the opening poem, although this is not clear nor clarified by the final line. Indeed, many of the poems are evasive or cryptic in this same way, avoiding the specifics of a memoir account; the result is, I believe, that these works are more intimate, whilst they also open up the poems for readers to identify with their familiar circumstances.

Smith's mother was a violinist, as was her sister, and her husband is also a musician (details gleaned from the dedication). Music has evidently played a large part in Smith's life and experience, and the 'low tones' inherited from this poem's addressee suggest music's ability to move the listener and to channel grief. In a later poem, Smith writes 'that's music for you, so much more than sensory delight' ('Slowly Time Is Moving Fences' 15).

Music and sound reappear in the poem 'Soundtracks', which begins:

> Music is about memory, but enduring is about forgetting.
>
> They'd cut off your hair but you could summon up the tresses, tap them into a poem.
>
> At first the boots felt like a threat, a reminder of surveillance. They came too close, the wall a spineless membrane. But then you started to need, even desire, them. Punctuation of the night, grammar of dismantled senses.
>
> […] (8)

The poem continues to unfold in a surreal manner, as if it is recounting a dream, or a film, almost denying the reader any sure footing – a characteristic that may broadly define the complete collection, as I will note below.

Smith does not stay close to the self, but extends her field of vision beyond personal experiences to critique and reflect on political, social and cultural issues and events both current and past, with poems that refer to the Holocaust, asylum seekers, war, environmental threats, political correctness, violence and abuse, and the treatment of women's bodies. Frequently we are confronted with a voice that attempts to navigate the complex terrains of both lived experience and the academic, theoretical discourse that surrounds social issues; Smith does not confound us with convoluted meditations, but instead allows us to see a mind still working through concepts – figuring out where it might rest its argument – within the space of the poem. Further, the conversational and everyday language used by the poet throughout the book provides an uncanny trap of simplicity, before luring us deeper to consider complex and difficult issues. Poems such as 'Verdict', for example, offer a narrator who recalls past experiences in public – 'there was the man who touched her up in the queue, the man who stood outside her room waiting for her, the man who took her outside and threatened to kiss her, the man who put his hand

down the back of her blouse…'(19) – and reconsiders the parameters of sexual harassment, concluding with the lines: 'she had not been abused / *Or had she?*' (20).

There are poems in *Word Migrants* that I expect might resonate with women readers. 'The Bleeding Obvious', for example, is an internet cut-and-paste prose poem that provides interesting cross-cultural facts about perceptions and myths relating to menstruation, whilst also demystifying the menstrual cycle. Other poems confront voluntary childlessness: 'Feisty and Childless' samples comments from newspaper articles, internet forums and academic discourses on childlessness as a way for the author to, perhaps, channel her own sentiments. This is a topic that Smith returns to in several poems including 'The Club', where opening lines tell us 'the woman who didn't have / what other people have / was looked upon / with fear with pity and with envy' (80).

One of my favourite poems is 'The Poetics of Discomfort', perhaps because I identify with the awkwardness of the poem's speaker, who is trying to navigate politically-correct culture and public behaviours around difference and disability. Similar feelings are explored in the prose poem 'Choice', where the poem's female subject debates what poems to perform at a poetry reading. While many of the poems, like these ones, do not appear to take themselves too seriously, the poet provokes a sense of discomfort that unsettles in its familiarity. Indeed, many of the poems in *Word Migrants* exhibit a sense of unease, anxiety and hesitation, when it comes to dealing with the world and particularly with its complex human inhabitants. There is a sense that this anxiety has increased dramatically in a society where 'editors, teachers, tweeters, bloggers / we are all interventionists now' ('Blow-up' 25) – that is, when we are both bombarded with and have ready access to information (including the wrong information!) it can be difficult not only to get one's bearings, but also to know what is appropriate to talk about. There are lines that seem to address this: 'Chronically, we sort words into piles, stitch up the scattered mess of the senses' ('Mix-ups' 45); 'she pulls books at random off the shelves / and from a witch's brew of / cut-ups, misfits, annexations / conjures up a wicked quilt' ('The Educator' 58).

While exploring these issues and concerns seems to be one driving force behind the unfolding collection, Smith seems equally preoccupied with experimenting with different poetic forms. More conventionally, free verse poems appear amongst prose poems, visual poems, poems that read like a series of monochords, language experiments, and the above-mentioned 'cut and paste' poems. Further, Smith explores multiple perspectives, voices and emotional registers, from the personal to the abstract; from the deeply moving to the humorous. Where many poetry collections showcase a dominant mood or style, there is a sense that Smith wants to irritate our expectations, to consider the spaces between vast differences in form, language and politics. *Word Migrants* has us traversing across those spaces, noting how our perspectives can change or 'migrate' when confronted with radical difference. As Smith notes, 'disagreement is the driver for seeing other points of view' ('Disagreement' 29).

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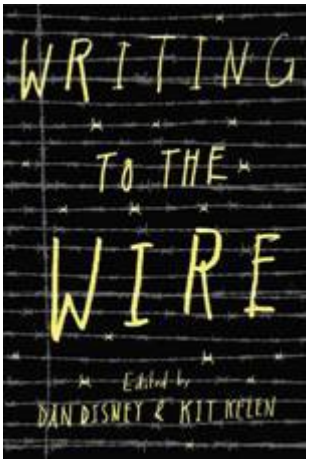
**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo**
**Reviews editor: Linda Weste**
**text@textjournal.com.au**

**TEXT review**

# Poetry of dissent

## *review by Paul Munden*




*Writing to the Wire*
Dan Disney and Kit Kelen (eds)
UWAP, Crawley WA 2016
ISBN 9781742588667
Pb 232pp AUD24.99

This review was written at the time that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, attending the Leaders' Summit on Refugees convened by President Barack Obama, confirmed Australia's long term commitment to an increased intake of refugees; 'pragmatic and compassionate' was his self-description of the approach. *Writing to the Wire* has plenty of compassion; its relation to pragmatism is altogether more complex.

The impulse behind the anthology is a belief in poetry's ability to do better than political rhetoric, to speak in a way that is honest about difficult truth. Many of the poems included honour that belief, some of them relating painful, personal experience as straightforward testimony. Indeed the strength of these pieces raises a question about the added value that poetry of supposedly greater artifice can bring. The anthology has certainly taken a risk in mixing refugee voices with more established poets whose work occasionally looks poor by comparison.

The editors write well about the ethical credentials of a nation; about citizenship and privilege; and the concept of being human. Their brief aside about the treatment of sharks is an important one: the attitude problem represented by the treatment of refugees is part of something even bigger. The Terence / Lucretius statement that 'I am human and so nothing human can be foreign to me' (10) may be a statement of hospitality, even 'all embracing love', but the human capacity to hate is also part of the picture (see the Paul Verhoeven quotation cited by Kent MacCarter 187), and the polarisation of society, in its attitudes not only to other human beings, but to life on earth, has rarely been more evident. With almost half the United States population backing Donald Trump, and a similar

percentage of United Kingdom voters were in thrall to Nigel Farage, Kant's assertion (13) that one should 'Act according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law' is in danger of becoming a bigot's licence. Particularly alarming is the way in which Farage and others have held up Australian policy as a shining example of good practice.

These global connections are crucial. *Writing to the Wire* has an Australian focus, but the core issues are universal. The controversial roasting of a pig outside the Australian Broadcasting Commission studios could easily have happened in the UK, the US or elsewhere. And as Heather Taylor Johnson makes clear in her poem 'In the Bottom Eight', hateful incitements are sometimes evident in our own domestic environments: 'There is talk about murder at the dinner table *bomb the lot of them* in my own kitchen' (106).

It is interesting, given the book's claim to be addressing identity (and specifically 'the idea of being Australian'), that certain poets have chosen to be anonymous. In some cases this is clearly for self-preservation, but perhaps an editorial 'offer' caught on. Perhaps the issue of Australian identity was something that the poets felt reluctant to explore, an indulgence in comparison to the desperate traumas inhabiting the same space. (Coral Carter's 'Australia Day 2014' is a notable and powerful exception.) Exploring the concept of 'home' is also somewhat avoided. 'No *home*, (an inflexible, judged word – / foolhardy for any to claim)' writes Les Wicks (174). There is a sense that, when faced with abhorrent political rhetoric, and a challenge ('Surely we are better than this?'), some poets have – albeit understandably – balked. It is perhaps disappointing that so many poems adopt a detached ironic voice, mimicking bureaucratic speech. It seems too easy. It may aim to expose the shallowness of such talk, but it comes close to suggesting that it is all we've got; that poetry can't do much better after all.

The ironic voice can of course be used to powerful effect, and in Jenni Nixon's prose poem, 'Under Canvas', the ironic spotlight is not on political rhetoric but arts journalism. The poem offers a pseudo review of a pseudo new documentary, in which 'In a pitiless slow tracking shot a child is sexually assaulted on a lengthy walk to the toilet block. Brutal. Disappointing is the lack of subtlety...' (186).

There is a marked contrast between the ironic tone of many of the more established poets and the testimonies of those writers – perhaps less well known – who have suffered detention. There are powerful poem-stories with a bleak simplicity by Hani Abdile, B, Behrouz Boochani, Hazara, and Naomi So (only ten years old). Some, though harrowing, are beautifully shaped and have the quality of haunting fable. Other poets, without any such personal experience to draw on, have also chosen to keep things simple, and with positive results. By contrast, those poems that eschew such directness in favour of more elaborate constructions don't always convince; they sound like faux-storytelling, lacking authenticity. Generalisations are also problematic: 'like all of us, they come in the hope of a better life' writes Andy Kissane in 'Beached Dreams', referring to asylum seekers reaching Christmas Island, but is 'like all of us' really true?

A scrupulous honesty about one's relation to any 'story' is paramount. That is demonstrated well by Diane Fahey, whose poem '(from) A Death in Winter' begins: 'I read the newspapers, / learn of Leo's life'. It goes on to say: 'How can I venture / to speak of such things? // I step back now, /

insist that I do not know / what Leo's sufferings might have been like. // I can only create – for myself, for others – a space for imagining' (58). Maybe that is the ultimate *hospitality* of which the editors speak.

Within the personal testimonies, depth of feeling does occasionally create problems. To suggest that 'Morrison ... is enjoying my pain' (51) seems unwarranted, but the writer, Sabrin Ahmed, is an 18-year-old Somali girl held in Australian immigration detention. It is understandable that she should write such a thing, even though it oversteps the mark, but it has to be recognised that naming is problematic and risks alienating readers. Jennifer Harrison makes a more tactfully anonymous (and perhaps more sophisticated) criticism when she writes: 'once I saw a man killed on a motorcycle track as people / cheered the race on'. Perhaps, in any case, naming politicians is to miss the point. Mention of Abbott seems almost ridiculous, with his demise already history but having resulted in little change. Of the various mentions, only Stuart Cooke's '(Tony Abbott is a) Flarf Fugue' really works, executed as it is with considerable verve.

A feature of the refugee-voiced poems is to address the reader, 'you', as a potential source of help. Ravi's poem 'Slow death knocks my heart' concludes:

> 'My eyes are growing dim
> because I am looking for your answer.
> When will you give it to me?' (175)

This form of address feels both instinctive and rhetorical in its questioning, but occasionally there are answers, and Ravi's plea receives (by sheer chance, owing to the alphabetical ordering of poems by title) a direct response from the poem that follows, by Maria Takolander (167). It's a direct apology ('I did nothing to save you') but it also goes further: 'it was clear that none of us would mean anything / unless we, like gods, decided to.' Fortuitous dialogue such as this constitutes one of the book's great strengths.

Several poems are in dialogue with themselves. There is dialogue between poet and the detained in poems by Anne Collins and Janet Galbraith; dialogue, or contrast of voice, is also key to poems by Melinda Smith and Richard James Allen, who contrasts 'The secret language of border guards and those who wish to cross' (169). The tactic produces a stereoscopic view of things that most politics avoids. Similarly, Jen Crawford's 'The Duty of Punishment' (66) twists 'right' and 'wrong' together into a rope that makes us think. Jordie Albiston's 'I am you' (101) works a comparable magic, with its inbuilt opposites ('exist / unexist', 'extinct / unextinct'). And an amusing take on such self-contradiction is provided by David Musgrave in 'Wire' (201), his riff on the 'yeah nah' response at large in our quotidian conversations.

There is both hope and dread, sometimes balanced within a single poem. In 'The Answer' Eileen Chong writes: 'The boy holds something / metallic and long: I don't want it to be a gun'. This querulous balance is evident in a number of other poems focusing on children, where innocence is matched by the strongest of hearts. In 'Dog, Mountain, Moon', Graeme Miles' writes: 'Ask our daughter each morning what she dreamed. / Usually 'a dog, a mountain and the moon.' / She adds, 'I wasn't scared' (62).

It is perhaps hardly surprising, given the sombre focus, that poetry's more sensuous capabilities are seldom employed. An exception is Sarah Holland-Batt's 'Manus Green tree Snail', 'its body a foot chugging / over craquelure of lichen' (124). The poem is distinguished, too, by its subtle intellectual movements:

> the thrash of fallen forest
> collateral in the hunt
> for the peashoot twist
> of shell, each discovery
> another necklace or knick-knack
> to hang around a neck
> or park on a mantelpiece
> somewhere overseas,
> one of those civilised countries
> that only knows
> how to love a thing
> to extinction.

This is superbly evocative and thought-provoking writing. Elsewhere in the anthology there is a tendency for the thinking to be too *bald*, not always rendered as poetry. Holland-Batt's poem is sharply focused on the snail but is resonant of so much more, the creature 'tugging its house, / trying to get rid of it / but glued there, hitched' (124). It succeeds through its quiet obliqueness, and there are other poems in the anthology that are admirable for a similar quietude, all the more affecting for their sense of humility, their reluctance to be over-vociferous. Lisa Brockwell, for instance, demonstrates an unassuming humility in her poem 'On Becoming a Housewife for the First Time at the Age of 41' but is quietly striving to be of value. The title, in the context of the traumas addressed in neighbouring poems, might suggest an abdication, but Brockwell reveals a fundamental anguish experienced when perceiving other lives in the balance.

Beyond quietude, it is silence itself that is repeatedly mentioned, even revered – though with appalled ambivalence. We witness silence in lips sewn shut, mentioned here many times. Dael Allison writes, 'we stitch tight our stories / sew ourselves silent' (164), and the connection with story-craft (and therefore writing) is troubling. In countering the bad words of political rhetoric, one might decide that silence is preferable, but as the poet S (another asylum seeker) states, in 'ONE MINUTE OF SILENCE' (148), it also carries the connotation of betrayal, of being ignored.

This wrestle with silence is at the heart of what the anthology is about. We instinctively want a clamour of outrage about the subject, yet we also know how, as readers, we resist those poems with a design on us. Complicating this further is the lack of poetic model for taking on the task. As Tom Paulin has written, of poetry in England: 'it would seem that political verse is virtually a lost art' (Paulin 1986: 40). This echoes an earlier and even more fundamental comment by Iris Murdoch, that 'we moderns have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary' (Murdoch 1961: 18).

*Writing to the Wire* steps bravely into this literary desert, and not without problems. It's all too clear that the very word 'politician' still sits uneasily in a poem, and yet we encounter it throughout the book. Moreover, some poems have the feel of being coerced: it's hard enough writing an effective

poem at the best of times; it's doubly difficult to write one 'to order' and on a political mission. Nevertheless, there are many successes. Being asked to address a particular subject can have the benefit of making one look at the world in new ways. It seems likely, for instance, that Lorne Johnson's description of the Superb Pitta, with 'wings shot through with the lustrous turquoise of Iranian mosque tiles' (126) was influenced by the multicultural context in which she was being asked to write. Other poems were clearly not written to order but are drawn from longer sequences of work in which the subject was already being taken passionately to heart. Poems by Lisa Jacobson and Samuel Wagan Watson have since appeared within longer works published by the International Poetry Studies Institute. Jacobson's poem, 'The Jews of Hamburg Speak Out', is one of several in *Writing to the Wire* that underlines the long history of the current refugee crisis.

*Writing to the Wire* is a substantial anthology, and although the collection of work might have been stronger for being slimmer, its bulk seems important, and there are many surprises and rewards: Felicity Plunkett's 'Trash Vortex'; Michelle Seminara's erasure poem; and Michael Sharkey's trademark revolving non-sequiturs. Michelle Cahill's 'Interlude' (a luxurious one), in which she states 'I forgot everything I knew' (112), makes us reflect on other interludes, such as detentions. Ross Donlon's 'Portrait of a Refugee' (153) makes the point (well) that refugees are unlikely to be saints, but the Uncle Stan of his narrative (which it is, rather more than a poem) is nevertheless a figure that enriched many people's lives.

The order (alphabetically by title) is in a sense random, thematically at least, and there might have been interesting, stronger connections made by a different approach. But any avoidance of editorial choice is probably justified by the principle of (random) neighbourliness; a poem lives with whatever it must, however 'other' to its own theme and poetics. There is a strange sense of responsibility, reading the anthology, to embrace those poems that are 'other', not as one might write oneself, or in the mould of what one tends most to admire. We have a duty perhaps, as readers, to keep open the borders of our literary tastes (though not necessarily to embrace poems that are not well written).

Overall, for readers familiar with contemporary poetry, the task is not a hard one, but what of those less familiar readers to whom the anthology would undoubtedly wish to speak? Adrian Mitchell famously stated that 'Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people' (Mitchell 1964: np). This anthology clearly avoids that charge, but might it have been slightly more *pragmatic* in its attempt to reach new audiences? Some poems seem unnecessarily obscure, burying their riches. Take these lines from 'Whatever' by Fiona Hiles: 'For those who have nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. / Like a man who has seen too much, I am tamed in the snare / of an earlier desire' (195). This is compelling writing but it comes towards the end of a poem that many readers will skip over as too difficult. More welcoming, perhaps, for a poetry newcomer, is a poem such as 'Queue-jumping' by Anthony Lynch, still thought-provoking for all its simple structure of contrasts, turning the title on its head. Prose poems have a significant role here too, offering a poetic voice that's rid of what, for some, are poetry's more scary accoutrements. Jane Williams' 'Still / life' (176) is particularly effective, as are prose poems by A Frances Johnson, namely 'Lovesong' (122) and 'Free Quote' (81) with its pose as a 'found poem' describing varieties of wire.

These are poems that avoid the trap of preaching to the converted – both poetically and politically. Other poems are in danger of reiterating well-rehearsed confrontations and lack of understanding, in a way that seems unlikely to be productive. In 'Borderlines' Jenni Nixon writes 'climate change is absolute crap – says Tony Abbott' (41). Most readers will share her outrage (and why *do* politicians fall into such predictable ranks, regardless of the particular issue?) but the poetic tactic risks dismissal from some quarters as a typecast stance; it is unlikely to change any hearts and minds, and that, surely, is the ultimate ambition.

Is poetry up to the job? Kevin Brophy, in his poem 'From The Book of Examples' (82), writes: 'I should have queued / or appealed to you in a letter / of reasoned prose'. This is irony at its best; it underlines the concept of poetry as dissent, or 'alternative' strategy, the one in which many of us place our faith. As Jennifer Harrison confirms, in 'drone illumination': 'reportage can't capture the entire despair of a shell' (63).

It is harsh to quibble with a book of such sincerity and heart, but one final small comment has to be made. In the otherwise exemplary 'Foreword' by Julian Burnside QC, it is surprising to find the phrase 'boat people' used uncritically. Andrew Melrose (2015) has written at length about the way the phrase entered media parlance in such a problematic, even derogatory way. Two poems in this anthology use it as a title, but immediately demonstrate its inadequacy; a third, 'STOP THE BAT PEOPLE' by Rachel Briggs, goes further in exposing its full nonsense. (Other poems, including John Brinnand's 'Newspeak in Wonderland' (141), also make use of 'nonsense' in their probing for meaning.)

So for every quibble there is a compensation. *Writing to the Wire* is an important anthology: not only does it give us insight into the topic, it also asks us, as all good anthologies do, to re-evaluate our ideas of what poetry is, and what it's for; what it can (and can't) do. It has categorically not, to borrow the words of Richard James Allen, 'already given up / on your ability to hear' (169). The editors want us 'to learn to be better listeners' (18). That is a fine and fitting ambition for this, and indeed any, poetry anthology.

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
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**TEXT review**

# A shrine to the fragment

## *review by Chloe Wilson*


*Pulse: Prose Poems*
Shane Strange and Monica Carroll (eds)
The Prose Poetry Project
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2016
ISBN 9780994456519
Pb no page numbers AUD9.95

One of the prose poems in *Pulse*, the second anthology to be produced by the Prose Poetry Project (after *Seam*, 2015), begins with Carolus Linnaeus's definition of taxonomy: 'the identification / of characteristics that sort instances into / groups'. This definition seems an apt description of Pulse itself; the anthology presents an extensive range of 'instances' of prose poetry, and proceeds to classify them into groups, where poems are linked by characteristics that are thematic, rather than formal.

The Prose Poetry Project, based at the University of Canberra, consists of a group of writers working, sometimes collaboratively, in what the editors of this anthology describe as an 'undecidable' form. This quality of unresolvable indecision, of occupying 'a space somewhere in between' poetry and prose, is put forward as the essential quality of the prose poem. This space, however, is expansive, and a strength of *Pulse* is its demonstration of the elasticity of the form it explores. One style of prose poem it features is the compact narrative:

> Once when we travelled you wore a key about your neck. People would stop and ask you what it opened — your heart, your home, the centre of the earth — but you insisted it was just a key that opened nothing extraordinary. Only to the Japanese waiter in the crypt at St Martin in the Fields did you allow any concession. When he asked if he might use it, you answered, *perhaps*.

This is one of the more straightforward works in *Pulse*. It contains character, setting, a type of closure. And yet, the work is also deft in its deployment of the compression, and the tendency towards ellipsis, that one might associate with certain types of poetry; the conclusion is satisfying, even resonant, though the reader is no closer to understanding the key's significance or purpose.

Other poems – a visceral imagining of why a raven is like a writing desk, a vivid evocation of a woman with 'borrowed arms and legs' walking on a tightrope which 'dissolves / into a flight of rainforest kingfishers' – are less concerned with narrative, and more with striking imagery, and the way the prose poem allows for thought to lead to thought by sound and association, rather than the linear progression of ideas. There are also works which reflect explicitly on the form of prose poetry:

> The cup said, 'I no longer need to be held.'
> Only the dog was home to hear it. In this
> poem the dog whispered to the glare from
> windows on far away houses. In another
> poem someone denies that cups have
> language. If you heave open that heavy door
> (by the brass handle) you can break the hum
> of the room. The short story described the
> handle as less than brass and unattainable.

The mentioned 'poem' and 'short story' dispute the scene being presented, and yet those works – which have presumably 'decided' that they belong to one of the forms the prose poem navigates between, and express their own certainties accordingly – do not exist. The prose poem, with characteristic uncertainty, thus denies and asserts itself at once.

*Pulse*'s definition of prose poetry is deliberately broad. The anthology includes poems with narrative, descriptive, lyric and metatextual modes, as well as cryptic fragments and satire. It even includes the occasional piece which exploits the inescapable blockiness of the prose poem; one poem which at first appears to merely repeat the question 'if you can't trust the future, who can you trust?' proves to be structurally complex, allowing the question to reflect and echo across lines, and the poem's rectangular shape to become labyrinthine.

The arrangement of *Pulse* is curious. The book is without page numbers, and all poems are without titles. The poems do not have the author's name attached; to discover the author of any individual poem, a reader is obliged to consult the list at the back of the anthology. There are two curated sequences of prose poems, one arranged by each editor, and these long sequences are then grouped into discrete cells of differing numbers of poems, collected by theme; the anthology's editors state in the preface that they hope the result of this arrangement is to have a '"pulse" of meaning beating through the book'.

The themes of poems in each group are often surprisingly concrete. In the book's first sequence, there are poems about jazz and blues music, then later, poems which present images of butterflies, and poems which explore a latent threat of violence, particularly in pastoral life; a poem in which a pet pig is shot sits alongside another in which a speaker asserts their refusal to eat bacon.

Other connections are less tangible; in the second sequence, for example, a group of poems is joined by richly colourful images which suggest eventual decay or destruction. There is, in one, a pigment 'often used by painters as the neutralis- / ing layer beneath pink skin, a knowledge / of earth climbing into fleshy tones,' and similar imagery later occurs in domestic scenes: one in which we see 'the salad dregs / by the cold chop fat' and another in which 'the beans are burnished / gold, and the asparagus glows red.'

While it is certainly enjoyable to consider the poems in the order they have been presented, and to locate connections between them, I did wonder how necessary it was to split the poems into so many discrete groups. There seem to be themes and motifs (time and nostalgia, ruptured intimacies, and images of the sea among them) which suffuse the entire collection, and the current sequencing does tend to direct a reader's attention, perhaps distracting from other ways in which the poems correspond to one another.

On the whole, however, this is a dynamic collection with a strong sense of purpose. 'I'm making a shrine to the fragment,' one prose poem begins; a fitting sentiment for *Pulse*, which demonstrates convincingly that the prose poem's 'undecidable' nature is the source of its vitality.

*Chloe Wilson is the author of two poetry collections,* The Mermaid Problem *and* Not Fox Nor Axe*, which was shortlisted for the 2016 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Judith Wright Calanthe Award. She received equal first prize in the 2016 Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize, and has been awarded the John Marsden Prize for Young Australian Writers, the (Melbourne) Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award for Poetry, the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, the Fish Publishing Flash Fiction Prize and the Arts Queensland Val Vallis Award. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne.*

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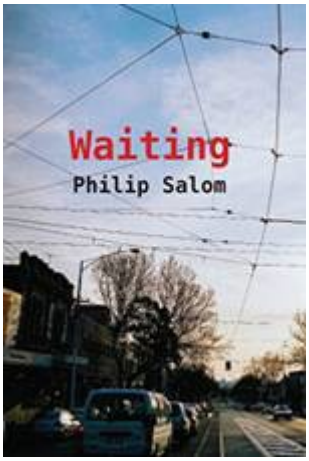
**TEXT review**

# The nothingness that should be something

## *review by Helen Gildfind*




Philip Salom
*Waiting*
Puncher & Wattmann, Glebe NSW 2016
ISBN 9781922186836
Pb 345pp AUD29.95

Once you've met Big and Little you will never forget them, or ever want to leave them. They are the ultimate odd couple, living in a hostel in North Melbourne, a place full of troubled people that the nineteenth century would have called 'down on their luck' but which the twenty-first century just calls 'losers' (28).

Big is a 'cross-dressing, pseudo-intellectual, show-off' with 'the autodidact's weakness' of having 'extensive but loose knowledge' (112-3). He is a well-read, eloquent, diabetic, Vietnam veteran and ex-shearer's chef. What plagues Big is 'not the black dog of depression but the grey hound of uncertainty' (114). He 'is the expert who must find an audience well beneath him' (114). At first glance Little might seem to be this audience as she trots alongside Big 'like a pup in blue denim' (2). As the story unfurls, however, it is Little who is shown to have the guts and know-how to navigate the terrors of The Telephone, The Law, Family and Travel. Inseparable in life as they are in syntax (1), these two characters reveal themselves to have the uncommon strength to flout convention and make their own way in the world, despite (or because of?) the few choices they have: to dress as a woman when you are a big man, and to love a big man who dresses as a woman, are not the choices of the meek, mindless or downtrodden.

The foil to Big and Little are Jasmin and Angus, Little's burly cousin. Jasmin is an academic semiologist, a wanderer in the abstract world of signs. Angus is a self-taught landscaper, a creator of the most concrete signifiers imaginable. Whilst Jasmin's heavy work entails 'lifting firmly but abstractly in a fixed firmament of alliterative and tautological shifts'

(9), Angus is a manly man – 'very oi oi oi' (9) – whose work literally entails moving rocks, though he does so with a wry awareness of the Myth of Sisyphus (56). They meet at an anniversary for those devastated by a recent bushfire: Angus also lives in the 'fire shadow' of trauma and 'un-changing loss' (10) that is the lot of these poor souls and that, perhaps, is everyone's lot in the end. Meanwhile, Jasmin is coming to terms with the loss of a partner whom, she realises, she never really had at all.

Salom uses the intertwining stories of these four people to explore the theme of 'waiting' and its constituent themes of aloneness and loneliness, the tension between inner and outer worlds, and the love and intimacy that can, at least in part, overcome these things. This is also a novel about class that exposes the unjust differences between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', even as it shows the universality of the human condition: we are all waiting for something, no matter who we are or what we have. Little waits for her mother to die so that she and Big can have the money to be alone, together, in their own place. Big longs for 'a life without further change' (116) and begs Little to stop yearning: 'This waiting will kill us. Best to be sensible. Expect nothing' (345). Big knows waiting 'is a terrible thing' that 'makes the waiter into the waiting. Noun into verb… It is passive, it is essentially a nothing until it is something' (319). Likewise, Jasmin, who is 'a terrible waiter', knows that suspension 'is far worse than suspense … it is the nothingness that should be something' (76). Angus, too, knows he 'is mad to keep waiting for something that he also worries about arriving' (339).

If unemployment contributes to Big and Little's status as fringe dwellers, Jasmin and Angus's working worlds perhaps compel them to be surface dwellers: hers is a world of reading signed spaces, his is a world of making them; both worlds seek, but don't quite find, the actual thing that is signified. If the reader senses something inauthentic in the middle class posturing and pretensions of these two, Jasmin and Angus seem to sense the same, and it is through sexual intimacy that they reach for something real. Ultimately, what differs most between the four characters is not just their classed realities but their (related?) attitudes to themselves: Little 'accepts her Little-ness' (203) whilst Big has 'never attempted explanations of his trans-state … because he found himself as a man in a shift, not a shift in a man. It felt right' (116). It is a triumph that this novel places the marginalised at its serious, if hilarious, centre, so they can talk back to those who might ridicule and stereotype them. But the novel's greatest triumph is that it does this in a way that leaves the reader *envying* Big and Little. Importantly, though Salom writes with a deep affection and compassion for all of his characters, he does not indulge in saccharine sentimentalisation, idealisation or trivialisation. On the contrary, he shows that despite (or because of) their many hardships, Big and Little seem to achieve what most people can't: a coexistence founded upon a genuine desire to accept, understand, support, and love each other, just as they are. 'The lonely meet sometimes; compatibility is indeed a strange thing' (32). As Angus proclaims, 'I am lonely! Even Little is not lonely' (229), and what is loneliness but 'the worst tense of all' (304)?

Another striking thing about this novel is Salom's use of language and place. Single sentences are loaded with alliterative play, multiple meanings and endless jokes. Passages of prose read like stream-of-consciousness music, each sentence – or line – having its own unique grammar and rhythm that evokes the mindscape of each character. This energetic playfulness allows readers to hurtle along with the narrative, or stop and savour the language itself: it is unique to have such narrative drive and

linguistic sophistication in the same book, and so, whilst *Waiting* is certainly 'serious literature', it is also a great read. Just as skilfully, Salom evokes the physical, political and cultural reality of contemporary, urban Australia with a multitude of salient details and a total lack of the apologetic self-consciousness that tinges so much 'Antipodean' writing of place. This insistent, natural realism grounds Big and Little in a real world that disallows readers from dismissing them as mere flights of fictional fancy.

*Waiting* is a laugh-out-loud, poignant novel about the struggle of individual mortals to relate to themselves and each other in a brutally capitalist, godless world. This novel explores the very real differences between people even as it reveals the universals that unite them. One might ask why Salom – a prolific writer of poetry and prose, who has won many awards for his work over the past three decades – is not a more prominent figure in the Australian literary scene. Our culture needs writers of this calibre to challenge not only how we see ourselves and Others, but how we use language to enable or blinker that seeing.

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo**
**Reviews editor: Linda Weste**
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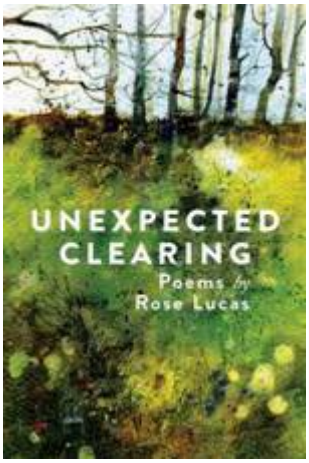
**TEXT review**

# Cut glass dancing

## *review by Dominique Hecq*




Rose Lucas
*Unexpected Clearing*
University of Western Australia Publishing, Crawley WA 2015
ISBN 9781742588056
Pb 111pp AUD25.00

The Australian poet Joanne Burns once wrote: ‘poetry never sits still on the page … even before you have started to read it you have entered another world, another place, another language’ (Burns 1999: 4). And before you know it, you are dancing. Poetry cuts through the edges of past and present. It makes its own choreography. The dance happens in the now. This is what it feels like to read Rose Lucas’s new collection, *Unexpected Clearings* (2015). The poems all effortlessly pass the litmus test of sharp and strong poetry. As Amanda Joy rightly states on the back cover of the book: ‘Rhythm and pattern follow with precision the rich tonality of Lucas’s visual and aural perceptions, delivered with just enough tension to allow a line to run free or a word to drop and hang alone where it dances, or stops’. But, of course! Why should we be surprised?

Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet, writer and academic who teaches poetry and editing at Victoria University. As a teacher, she is loved and revered. As a scholar, she is widely published in the areas of women’s poetry, feminism, psychoanalysis, literary theory as well as cinema studies. Indeed, having co-authored *Bridgings: Readings in Australian Women’s Poetry* with Lyn McCredden in 1996, she may be said to be one of Australia’s pioneer self-consciously feminist authors working across disciplines. These theoretical interests and political concerns inform her creative work and firmly inscribe her in the lineage of writers such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Her first collection, *Even in the Dark* (2013), won the 2014 Mary Gilmore Award for Poetry awarded by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. A major accomplishment, needless to say.

*Unexpected clearing* shows Rose Lucas as the purveyor of a poetic universe where culture and nature, intellect and feeling, reason and intuition intermingle. It would be facile to dwell on the images and emotions held at the core of her name, so I will refrain from all poetic and etymological flights in that domain. Suffice to say, she brings to her subjects a discernment which is astute yet passionate; an intensity which is lens-like in its ability to capture the tensions of a life lived shifting between real and imagined worlds. Loss, impending or accomplished, grief, displacement and longing are dominant themes, though the possibility of home and the exhilaration of travel are invoked again and again, like flashes of light among the shadows that inhabit the four parts of this book: 'Unexpected clearing', 'Night road', 'Still beating heart', and 'Tracking the bay'.

Even when Lucas invokes works of art or cultural artefacts, as she does, especially in the first part of the collection, she is never content with descriptions of art works or meditations or their effect upon the viewer. Rather, she draws out subtleties of meaning, animating sounds and images, exploring and interpreting realities which speak of what it means to be human. For example, 'A capella', 'Balancing' and the 'Monet Series' all emanate from work heard, seen, or remembered to challenge the imagination to rove and deliver its verdict – aesthetic, philosophical, emotional, or otherwise. However, she is acutely aware that nothing can really be pinned down by language, that indeterminacy prevails. This is beautifully articulated in what some might see as art's riposte to science, 'What Isaac Newton Saw':

> an ordinary miracle that needs a different eye to see it,
> a new tilt of the head, or sudden mood of
> equanimity that allows leaves to rustle,
> branches to brush the lawn,
> a bird to move discretely and even
> try out some autumnal singing – (38)

It is this knowledge of contingency that provides the impetus and emotional power of so many of Lucas's poems. And, as an aside, this piece is just irresistible for those of us who have been intent on trying to re-define knowledge and research in the field of creative writing and beyond.

Some poems are simply entrancing because of the poise, precision and intensity of the images. 'In the Louvre' is a fine example of how Lucas deftly intertwines image with feeling and thought; how she uses understatement and sensibility to uncover the intricacies of the human heart in the context of cultural artefacts:

> To know the shining world
> of skin and breath,
> abstraction of thought and desire
> transubstantiated
> into the gesture of a hand,
> the luminosity of marble flesh – (69)

It is a salient feature of Lucas's work that she never relinquishes engagement with the intimate and personal circumstances in which art acquires significance.

Often, Lucas builds up her poems incrementally, using brief, subtle sequences which let the images bear the emotional weight lightened up by

more subtle visual details or attention to sounds. Often, she lets the last line hang, like a tree limb trembling in the air. Hers is a poetry of control, not constraint, for images mostly strike out at unexpected angles, as if through cut glass. Very occasionally, though, this approach leads to predictability or contrivance, as is the case in the opening to 'Giverny': 'Avenues of colour – / your composed cultivations, / the fertile texture of loam' (8). Here the understated 'Avenues of colour' clash with the contrived 'composed cultivations' because of the quaintness and odd rhythmic patter of the noun 'cultivation'. This awkward transition is redeemed by the following lines: 'the fertile texture of loam / where children have tumbled seeds / spilling across' (8). And then Lucas surprises you. She does it the other way around: a feeling is followed by a waterfall of images. Witness how the gorgeous 'Unkiltered' cascades:

**Unkiltered**

by
the rising thought of you –

a sudden wildness in the air;
ozone, sultriness,
austere chill of flurry,
quiet, white world –

you slip my planet side-
ways,
turning its winds,
chinook across wide plains,
human breath on frosty glass; (46)

Rose Lucas's poems engage the reader through an intimacy of tone and voice and through her ability to give expression to a range of emotions, including the wide gamut of these grief commands in the poignant pieces dealing with her mother's 'slips of mind and mood' (75) brought about by the 'infirmity … cage' of old age and decline.

Lucas is a poet of great elegance and self-control whose work is remarkably devoid of affectation. Her poetry probes experience and startles in unexpected ways. It is grounded, yet refined. Intense yet lyrical. 'These hands' (70) could be said to act as an allegorical enactment of her approach. It displays and dramatises the intense power of the imagery as it moves from 'how they [the hands] curl around the arc of your shoulder / in the quietly breathing night' to images of connection and release with 'the wild clasp of giving / and taking' all the while aspiring to higher realms as when the pen fingers hold 'quivers like an arrow / poised / ready to fly and find out / the fleeting mark' (70). The emotional delivery of the last image, which encapsulates the 'finer art / than elegance' these hands has 'learned', is simply stunning.

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The Book of Elsa*, Dominique Hecq's mythically inflected novel, was published in 2000. Since then, she has published three collections of short fiction, five books of poetry, and one CD with the assistance of sound artist Catherine Clover. Two of her plays have been performed in Australia, Belgium and Germany. Recent work since* Out of Bounds *(2009) and* Stretchmarks of Sun *(2015) increasingly pursues polygeneric concerns.* Hush*, a 'work in progress' for twenty-one years, pushes this formal concern even further. It will be released in 2017.*

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
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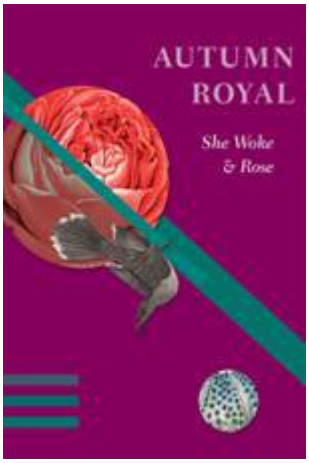
**TEXT review**

# Confession and confrontation in *She Woke & Rose*

## *review by Amelia Walker*




Autumn Royal
*She Woke & Rose*
Cordite Books, Melbourne VIC 2016
ISBN 9780994259660
Pb 53pp AUD20.00

'I wish to confront, rather than confess' declares Royal in the preface to her debut poetry collection (xiii). It's a brave move – and curious, given that Royal's literary influences include Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, both of whom are commonly connected with twentieth century American confessional poetry (Perkins 1987: 588; Benfey 2002: 43; Carter 2012: np). I therefore read *She Woke & Rose* wondering about Royal's connections to these and other historic literary figures, and pondering the relationship between confession and confrontation generally.

Royal evokes Plath's 'The Applicant' in 'Hey Lady' (3), the opening poem of *She Woke & Rose*. Readable as a sardonic reflection on gender and other social norms, 'Hey Lady' makes effective use of puns and repetition – for instance, 'miss':

> ...the train – she might wreck – hey lady – have you written
> –
> all this down – she said like – books – don't forget to
> submit –
>
> storybook – say something – smoothing – like –
> on the form – there's space for miss – that space –
>
> don't miss it... (3)

The dashes stylistically signal another influence: Emily Dickinson. For instance, in 'Boiling Water' Royal demonstrates that she, like Dickinson,

is a poet with a keen ability to make familiar, domestic objects appear strange, perhaps even a little frightening:

> I want to reduce my thoughts
> having sliced them with a knife,
> bluntly. I hold my hands
> over the aluminium mouth, allowing time
> for each line to sink in... (23)

Though not a 'confessional poet' per se, Dickinson strongly influenced the twentieth century American movement (Benfey 2002: 43), and the tributes to her in *She Woke & Rose* make Royal's confront-not-confess stance still more curious. So too do the book's frequent motifs of blood, bleeding and other 'red' phenomena, including roses, flowers and 'flowering periods' all of which can signify menstruation and / or female embodiment. These motifs, along with Royal's tendencies to write of 'the uneasy space of the body' (Takolander 2016: xv) make *She Woke & Rose* readable as a kind of écriture feminine or writing the feminine in the tradition of Hélène Cixous (1976). Also notable is Royal's tribute to Adrienne Rich, who, along with other feminist writers of the 1970s and later, used motifs of blood and red as part of an effort to 'address taboo subjects and social limitations that plagued American women' (Wilson 2014: np) in line with the feminist conviction that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 2006).

Rich is perhaps the key to the confront / confess quandary of Royal's collection, for although Rich's work 'suggests confession', her primary commitment was 'to invoke social truths in her work' (Carter 2012: np). By declaring her wish to confront, Royal seems to be echoing this commitment. Furthermore, via her tributes to figures like Sexton and Plath, Royal makes it clear that she is not attempting to spurn the 'confessional' tradition but perhaps to re-invest it as something that always was itself confrontational and political. However, socio-political readings of confessional poetry are well-established – including by Rich (2009: 144) – so if this is Royal's major contribution, it is hardly groundbreaking. [1]

A better key, then, might be Gilbert and Gubar's historic work (1979) on 'the anxiety of authorship' (Gilbert & Gubar 2000: 49) – developed as a feminist response to Bloom's (1973) 'anxiety of influence', which pitches the Western poetic tradition as a violent 'family romance' in which each heir overthrows their predecessor (Bloom 1997: 8). In Gilbert and Gubar's model, the latecomer writer seeks instead to connect and collaborate with predecessors – to place themselves within a literary tradition and celebrate, rather than deny influences (2000: 49). Considering that the thirty-four poems in *She Woke & Rose* include at least fifteen explicit dedications to female writers, not to mention implicit references and allusions, it seems reasonable to suggest that connections with feminist writing traditions are what Royal's book seeks, knowingly or otherwise.

These feminist connections worried me, at first. Despite the historic and ongoing gains feminist poetry has offered, pursuing the same approach uncritically and unchanged in present times would be problematic, given more recent discussions around contemporary feminism's capacity for becoming implicated in the reinforcement of hegemonic heteronormative norms of gender privilege, entitlement, marginality and injustice (Serano 2007: 359). Or as Eades has remarked of écriture feminine, the 1970s approach, for all its historic worth, 'no longer fits' – fails to fully accommodate the fluid diversities of contemporary bodies, genders,

identities and lives (Eades 2015: 10). Thankfully, *She Woke & Rose* goes well beyond mere re-enactment of feminist poetic traditions. For instance, the book's final and title poem insists:

> ...if she is to become putty, she will do it herself
>
> because this is her first life as a woman
> & poetry will help her to receive
> her chosen body & the flowering periods
> no matter where the blood discharges... (50)

Here, Royal signals that femininity need not be defined by menstruation and / or the assigned sex of one's physical body. The poem accommodates possibilities of transgender, intersex and asexual ways of being. Furthermore, it must be noted that Royal's influences extend well beyond feminism. She cites contemporary and historic poets including William Carlos Williams, Frederick Seidel, Jo Langdon, Amy Key, Felicity Plunkett, John Fowles and Anne Carson, all of whose works bear richly diverse relationships to gender, sexuality and politics.

Royal also cites from intellectual spheres beyond poetry, for instance circus performer Skye Gelllman, scientist Carl Sagan, conceptual artist Hong-Kai Wang, and composer Chris Mann. *She Woke & Rose* thereby bridges multiple centuries, cultures and disciplines of thought. Royal's poems connect and converse with all these influences, drawing them into conversations, (re)creating a poetics of possibilities.

These possibilities are realised in particularly exciting ways through Royal's play with fragmentation, gaps and erasures – for instance, in 'in the elevator, heading for the 23rd floor' (26-29), a four-part sequence about creative practices of cutting-up, remixing, collaboration and improvisation, which also ponders relationships between the arts and social change. Another example is 'Like a Bridge' (20-21) – also a sequence – which forges fascinating links between culturally, historically and geographically disparate writers and traditions. A further example, 'In Motion' (31) visually configures breath and its heady rhythms, suggesting transformation and boundlessness – or, 'no edges' (Carson cited in Royale 2016: 31).

If at first Royal's desire to 'confront, rather than confess' (2016: xiii) seems to eschew poetry traditions, by my reading, *She Woke & Rose* reinvests in confession and confrontation while pushing beyond what has been framed – for transformation(s), socio-cultural, linguistic, poetic and o/Otherwise. This is a refreshing first collection which could afford to name and own the ways in which it most vitally succeeds.

## Notes

[1] Rich lists Plath and Dickinson among Rimbaud, Wallace Stevens and Yeats as poets whose works, though frequently introspective, at least in the superficial sense, continue to 'flare up anew' as 'signals flashing across infected waters', embodying what 'poetry can be: an *exchange in energy*, which, in changing consciousness, can effect *change in existing conditions*' (Rich 2009: 144, original emphasis). return to text

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*Amelia Walker was awarded her PhD in early 2016 from the University of South Australia, where she now works as a creative writing tutor. Amelia has published three poetry collections and three* 'All You Need to Teach' *poetry resource books. She has presented papers at several AAWP conferences and was awarded the 2015 postgraduate prize.*

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**

**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo**
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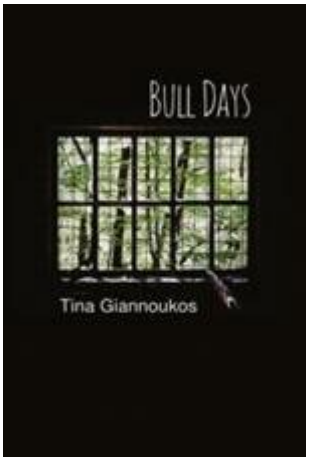
**TEXT review**

# A labyrinth of poetry

## *review by Caitlin Maling*




Tina Giannoukos
*Bull Days*
Arcadia, Australian Scholarly Publishing
North Melbourne Vic 2016
ISBN 9781925333626
Pb 58pp AUD19.95

Tina Giannoukos' second collection, *Bull Days*, is a tight, narrative-driven sonnet sequence investigating love's possibilities and pitfalls. Through fifty-eight sonnets the speaker details recurring cycles of love affair, experienced or imagined. In the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* it is noted how in the early modern period the sonnet sequence was 'often thought to have a special, almost automatic, claim to overall integrity – whether topical …, meditative …, or vaguely chronological' (Preminger & Brogan 1993, 1171). *Bull Days* has this sense of holism, the poems circling and recircling the same events and people with a pattern of familiar words and images. The sonnets are titled with roman numerals, such that there is slippage from poem to poem – privileging the book as a whole and emphasising the dialogic and philosophical nature of the sequence. This interconnection is addressed directly in sonnet 'XI' where

> All loves are linked. The liturgy of this affair,
> heretical, permits violation. In dialogue,
> we discover the monologue. My words
> slip between idioms. I am in drag. (11)

Especially in the earlier sonnets, the link between the discursive function of the form and the role of the sonnet in love poetry is continually reiterated. In 'II' the title of the collection appears in one such statement: 'The tongue of love tastes tough in these bull days' (2). What can only be reluctantly written – if it can be written at all – reappears in 'VI' 'I'm not being ironic when I say / no song's been written or poem / that can explain

why I don't miss / your touch' (6), 'VII' 'the silence that haunts the life alone / cannot be spoken' (7) and 'IX' 'I have no letters, only words on my computer' (9) among others.

In addition to these questions of the role of speech in telling and maintaining a relationship, central images and metaphors are repeated. Key to these is that of the matador and bull, with the speaker imagined in the role of the bull. What makes this image interesting, is how Giannoukos depicts power shifting between matador and bull. In 'XIV' this happens in a single poem (14). We move from 'You must sever my aorta / snap the spinal cord quick' through the bull inciting the matador to kill to end on 'I'm waiting. / Blood drenches my mouth' (14). This final image could be the outcome of the matador taking the bull's instruction to deliver the blow or his having waited too long and received a goring. The blood is both the bull's and the matador's; the violence, shared by them.

Repeated images are often used like this, signifying shifts of power and identity between the speaker and the lover. In 'X' what might have been pedestrian or common images of 'These breasts are honey to your eyes // This is the fire you want, the tremble you seek' are altered in subsequent poems (10). So we encounter in 'XII' 'Her breasts are honey to my eyes. // This is the fire I want, the tremble I seek. / It's too late, the time is past for / loving too loose to count as song or praise' (12). The perspective shifts from the speaker to the lover and then it extends out beyond either of them. The repetition adds cumulative emotional heft to poems that might otherwise only vaguely resonate, as in 'XXVII' where the lines 'I trace my love for you back ten thousand years / to days of honeycombed rooms and courtyards' transport the reader back to the immediacy of honeyed breasts and lovemaking (27).

This is not to say that *Bull Days* is entirely mired in the more serious and mortal aspects of love. Some of the collection's best lines convey dark humour as in 'XXIII' where 'This was my crime: I was never sentimental' (23). In a similarly snide aside, 'XXVII' offers a memorable ending: 'Wine tastings are ideal / for ditching a lover and getting a new one' (27). What could have enlivened *Bull Days* even further is if a similar sense of humorous experimentation had been paid to the sonnet form. We see potential for this in the standout 'XXXIV' where the interplay between regular iambs, heavy enjambment and broken prosody creates an arch tone:

> The sea is blue today. The saltbush
> grey as your love. Sea rushes to shore.
> Sea rush spikes upward. The saltmarsh
> spreads in all directions. Only cushion bush
> keeps tight knots of space. A magpie
> looks as if it squats to shit. Only humans
> pick up after a dog's poo. The canine
> species is doing well in evolutionary speak.
>
> When summer comes the gun sea of metal days
> that put me in harm of love's way breaks at your shore.
> Stand and wait. There's an empty bottle bobbing
> that way. The albatrosses and the seagulls got
> to it first: uncorked it and swilled all its medicine.
> On your shore the sea is the coolest shade of mock heroic.
> (34)

The contradiction between the song-like prosody and the images, question the integrity of the form. Just because something can be made to sound beautiful, doesn't make the thing itself beautiful.

It would have been interesting to see more of these very deliberate manipulations of formal elements. There are very few formalist sonnets but there are fewer still that truly experiment with what a fractured sonnet form might have brought to this traditional consideration of love. As it stands, *Bull Days* is a rigorously comprehensive, philosophical account of love. Well suited to the sonnet sequence, it uses the form in rewarding ways to hold emotion in check and to subject it to an intellectual interrogation. What perhaps is missing, are moments of rupture, of shock, something that could have extended out the form into spaces of new potential.

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*Caitlin Maling is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney. Her work examines pastoral poetry in the USA and Australia from an ecopoetic lens. She has published one book of poetry and a second is forthcoming in early 2017.*

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
**http://www.textjournal.com.au**
**General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo**
**Reviews editor: Linda Weste**
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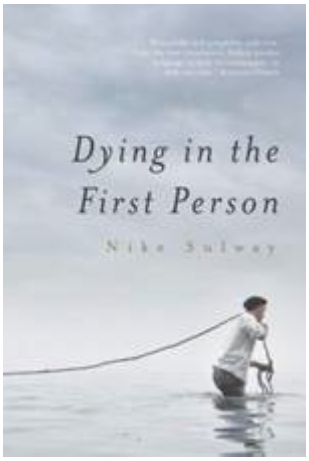
# Dying to speak

## *review by Rachel Hennessy*




Nike Sulway
*Dying in the First Person*
Transit Lounge Publishing, Yarraville Vic 2016
ISBN 9780994395832
Pb 175pp AUD29.99

As its title suggests, Nike Sulway's *Dying in the First Person* is concerned more fully with the process of articulation, rather than the process of dying. It is a novel that conveys the struggle of language to embody our experience. Whilst the act of physical dying is prominent – from the opening sentence's description of a suicide by drowning to the prolonged portrayal of the loss of an elderly mother – this is ultimately a work concerned with the intersection between life and writing, and the difficulty of using words to describe the many acts we undertake to give meaning to our limited days. While the inability of the written sign to become *what is* – or, as Sulway simply puts it, 'a poem about a child is not a child' – is widely interrogated in academia (and indeed there are allusions in the text to Derrida and Bakhtin), nevertheless it is refreshing to read a fictional piece so primarily concerned with the slippage between the word and the corporeal which is, at the same time, readable and emotionally engaging.

Samuel, the narrator whose perspective focalises the majority of the narrative, is the translator of his twin brother Morgan's books. Written in a language the boys created in their childhood, Morgan's works have generated a substantial fan base; even a conference is dedicated to the fictional land of Nahum. After Morgan's death, Samuel is joined in rural Queensland by Ana, the woman who was with Morgan when he died in Amsterdam. Morgan's relationship with Ana is unclear; indeed many things remain opaque for a good part of the novel.

*Dying* effortlessly moves between the past – where the two boys navigate the confused waters of their parents' relationship – and the present, where Samuel is working on a translation of Morgan's final work, falling in love

with Ana, and watching his mother succumb to inoperable cancer. Samuel's difficulties with his translation allow ample opportunities to ruminate on the nature of such work and Sulway authentically articulates his struggle:

> I pressed my bare feet, my bare hands, my bare heart against the page, knowing I would never get beneath the surface. Knowing that no matter how hard I tried to annihilate myself, I would always come between the work and the world. I would always be the one who spoke of it, for it, rather than speaking from within it. (9)

Although steeped in the language of Nahum, Samuel is unable to fully realise his brother's vision. His failure speaks to the disconnection between what we mean to say and what we can say: how can we enter the head of another, even when we speak the same language? How many secrets do we keep when we maintain certain realities? This theoretical struggle is echoed in Samuel's relationship with Ana; a barrier exists between them, one which Samuel cannot fathom.

The lyricism used in describing the new lover's relationship often bumps up hard against the more pragmatic prose of the memories, primarily because the character of Ana is something of a cipher – her role as a fully realised woman is kept in check until the last section of the novel, when she is given her own voice. Holding back so much of the storyline until this final section is a brave act, for it piles revelation upon revelation and pushes the reader's sense of the credible. The story of the brother's father, for instance, comes somewhat out of the blue, as the father figure has to that point remained enigmatic in the narrative. By contrast, we get a much greater sense of Samuel's mother, who she is and the pain of her dying, and once again, Samuel's role as a translator / writer is deftly used to interrogate the freedoms of textual representation:

> If only she were a figment of my imagination. An old woman kneeling by her husband's grave… The old woman will die, but her dying will always be about to occur, and occurring; it will never be completed. The pages in which she is dying can be revisited again and again; they will always be in the present tense. Her dying will never slip into the past tense; she will never become a ghost or a memory. (182)

Ultimately, it is the linguistic secret revealed in the novel – as opposed to the familial – which is most satisfying, because we are so highly aware of the construction of the world we are in. This is the challenge Sulway has undertaken: to both create a real scenario – for there is nothing here beyond the scope of plausibility – and to constantly draw our attention to the ways in which her medium is limited; that is, the weakness of words in comparison to the messy experiences of life:

> The difficulty lay in getting language – any language – to say anything without being false. Everything I wrote was a shadow of the thing I wrote about: a shape more insubstantial but greater, too. Wide, dark, flowing out across the surface of the ornamented world … I worked hard to demonstrate that all these things lived, in the body, in the world, as we live – as I live – not only as languages

> and ideas, but as creatures formed of wind and flesh and love. (263)

There is always the possibility of this self-consciousness overwhelming the ability of the reader to immerse fully into the narrative. Yet Sulway has a strong sense of how to weave her ideas into the fabric of her characters' lives, rather than having them appear as an 'other' text imposed on the top of her plot. It is apt that water is used throughout the writing as a metaphor, as there is an undercurrent, a stream of intellectual analysis which runs forcefully under this quietly powerful novel.

*Dr Rachel Hennessy's second novel* The Heaven I Swallowed *was completed as part of her PhD at the University of Adelaide. It was Runner up in The* Australian */ Vogel Award and longlisted for the Nita B Kibble Award. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.*

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**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
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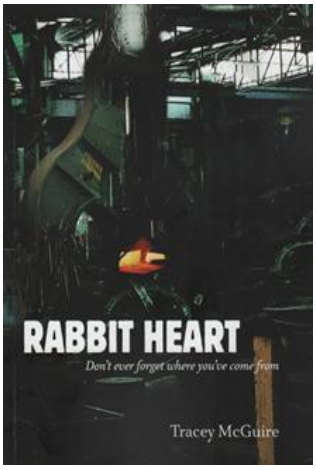
# Remembering where you come from

## *review by Enza Gandolfo*




Tracey McGuire
*Rabbit Heart*
Hit and Miss Productions, Parkville VIC 2016
ISBN 9780734051868
Pb 237pp AUD25.00

At the centre of Tracey McGuire's novel, *Rabbit Heart*, is the relationship between a father and daughter. The novel opens with a prologue in two sections that captures something of the essence of that relationship. The first section set in 1970 introduces the 'rabbit heart' that gives the novel its title:

> Dianne ran to her father. She fell across the line and into those freckled, furry arms. He picked her up and gave her a whizzie. He hugged her to his chest.
> 'Good girl, Number One Drop o' Water. Second.' She squeezed his neck and he snuggled his prickly chin under hers. 'Your heart's racing like a bloody rabbit.' (8)

As a child and young woman, Dianne idealises her father – she is the one with his 'rabbit heart' – but as an adult she has to come to terms with his faults and flaws and claim her identity separate from his. The second part of the prologue is set thirty-five years later, and begins with Dianne waiting outside the church before her father's funeral, and watching as the various family members gather. Ted's secrets are out in the open now, and the whole family knows he had a long-time lover and another son. The 'rabbit heart' and Ted McIntyre's death frame the novel.

A central focus of the narrative is the annual pilgrimage that Ted, his brothers, Archie and Jack, and their mates, Fat Cat and James Warner, make to the Braybrook pub on the 15th October, the anniversary of the collapse of the Westgate Bridge, and the death of Jack's son, Jimmy. Jimmy was one of thirty-five men killed in the tragedy. They meet to

reminisce and to have a drink for Jimmy. But this year will be their last; Ted has a brain tumour and is dying.

The narrative unfolds as the five men and Dianne (who will be driving her father home) make their way to the pub. While Dianne is the main protagonist and much of the novel is written from her perspective, there are also several other sections written from different perspectives. There is a section from the point of view of each of the brothers: Archie, Jack and Ted (Dianne's father), and from James Warner. Each of these sections moves shifts back and forth from the men's early lives in the 1940s to the present (2005).

In novels with multiple narrative perspectives, it can sometimes be difficult to connect with the characters, but McGuire has managed to give each character their own voice and back story, and each of them is compelling in their own way. Archie, whose desire to make and wear dresses results in him being an outsider even as a child. Jack, whose marriage to a woman his parents don't approve of (because she is not Catholic) sees him estranged from the family for many years. And of course, Ted – a man with many secrets, with illicit desires and a tendency to do as he pleases. These are complex men who struggle with the demands made on them to conform to a society with narrow and conservative views on a range of issues including: masculinity, sexuality and religion. Their individual stories are woven together to create a portrait of a family, often dysfunctional, held together by their love for each other, and their willingness to support each other in times of crisis. The brothers and Dianne are the core of this novel. By contrast, James Warner's role in the novel and in the narrative seems peripheral, and somewhat of a distraction.

In many ways, the novel is a homage to Melbourne's western suburbs, and to the working class people who populated it in the 60s and 70s; a world that has mostly disappeared along with many of our manufacturing industries. McGuire is at her best evoking the landscape and culture of the industrial west in the second half of last century:

> The West Footscray factory covered a large area, so big that the foremen get around on bicycles. It employed more than four hundred workers. Ted was the only apprentice. The place was a typical fifty-year-old factory – stinking hot in the summer, freezing in the winter. And dirty. Filthy dirty, whatever the season. After a day crawling around under the floor and amongst the greasy machines, Ted was black. They were all black. There were no showers, just buckets of cold water. It was the apprentice's job to drop a piece of hot steel into each bucket to warm the water before knock-off time. No matter how much soap he used, or how hard he scrubbed, Ted couldn't get the grease from under his nails. His collars were always grimy. But he reckoned it was 'clean dirt'. Not like the blood and guts and stench that the meatworkers at the boarding house had to wash off. (44)

There is sometimes a nostalgic tone in *Rabbit Heart*, especially as the men now in their 50s and 60s look back, but the impact of having several perspectives and voices is that it is impossible for the past to be mythologised. And though Dianne loves her father and uncles, she is reflective and questioning of both her own motives and their stories.

I enjoyed reading *Rabbit Heart*. It evoked many memories of growing up in Footscray and Sunshine, and of the lives of many of the working class men and women of my neighbourhood. McGuire deals with the Westgate Bridge collapse and its consequences for ordinary families with sensitivity and through it gives us an insight into the way that men deal with grief and loss. It is rare to see a novel set in the industrial west, and for the stories of the working class to be told with such empathy and understanding.

The novel's subtitle commands: 'Don't ever forget where you've come from'. Though the working class continue to struggle, the nature of low paying jobs and of the western suburbs has changed forever. The world rendered in this novel is gone, but it is part of Melbourne's history. I agree with McGuire, these are the stories of the men and women who built the city; this is a history that we should not forget.

*Enza Gandolfo's novel,* Swimming *(Vanark Press 2009) was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award in 2010 and the ABC Fiction Award 2008. Her other books include* Inventory: on op shops with Sue Dodd *(Vulgar Press 2007),* It keeps me sane: women craft wellbeing with *Marty Grace (Vulgar Press 2009) and* Love and Care: The Glory box tradition of Coptic Women in Australia *(Vulgar Press 2011) with Marty Grace. Enza has a PhD in Creative Writing and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Victoria University, Melbourne. She is also the co-editor of* TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses.

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**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
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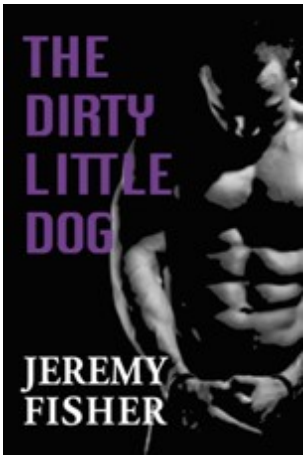
# Pushing back

## *review by Andrew Nette*




Jeremy Fisher
*The Dirty Little Dog*
Fat Frog Books, Haberfield NSW 2016
ISBN 9780959035063 (pb)
ISBN 9780959035070 (ebook)
Pb 200pp AUD23.95

*The Dirty Little Dog* is a hard-boiled crime novel, set in an alternative dystopian version of Sydney, with an overtly gay sensibility and main characters. While it is the third novel by Jeremy Fisher, former Executive Director of the Australian Society of Authors and now Senior Lecturer in Writing at the University of New England, it appears to be his first crime novel. This last point is significant because, while the book can be read from multiple viewpoints, this review specifically pertains to *The Dirty Little Dog* as a crime novel.

Fisher's Sydney is presided over by a dictatorial state premier in an uneasy alliance with a venal media mogul, Wardell Costello. 'The Premier's Office', as it is referred to, employs a quasi-military squad of thugs who beat up, imprison and torture anyone who gets in their way, while Costello uses his extensive business interests to smear or buy off his opponents. While there is a facade of democracy, together they run Sydney as a large company town.

Detective Sergeant Terry Bradley is on a break at Newtown Police Station, about to imbibe some rare Columbian coffee (unrestricted free trade deals mean, legally, Australians can only buy American instant coffee) when Pup, a young street hustler he's encountered in the past, visits. Pup, rent boy of Julian Costello, Wardell Costello's closeted, gay son, leads Bradley to a townhouse rented by Costello junior, where they find the dead body of one of the Premier's private security guards. Meanwhile, a famous footballer is found floating in Sydney Harbour. The two corpses share

similar injuries, indicative of very violent sex. There is no sign of Costello junior.

Bradley is assigned to the case, just as his long time lover, journalist Jack Rutherford, returns from assignment in the Middle East. Rutherford's previous attempts to report the truth about Costello senior's operations had destroyed his career in Australia, forcing him to work overseas, including in Cambodia, where, somewhat bizarrely, he spent time in a Khmer Rouge prison.

Rutherford and Bradley both have secrets. Wardell Costello discovers Rutherford's and blackmails the journalist into finding his son before his son's sexuality and possible involvement in the two murders, becomes public. The Premier, too, is keen to keep a lid on the fact her murdered security staffer was gay, but seizes the opportunity nevertheless, to sniff around for useful dirt to use against Costello and his media empire.

As crime fiction historian Woody Haut writes, 'private-eye fiction always seems to flourish in periods of, or immediately following, government secrecy, duplicity and paranoia' (Haut 1999: 73). As evidence, Haut explores the way investigatory crime fiction received a new lease of life in the United States in the seventies, amid the corruption of Watergate and the domestic blowback of Vietnam. That era produced a more diverse group of private investigators and, what we can call, accidental or quasi PIs, many of whom, like Rutherford, have an avowedly antagonistic relationship to the state and its organs.

Among the new group of investigators to emerge at this time was David Brandsetter. This openly gay insurance investigator created by Joseph Hansen, first appeared in *Fadeout* in 1970. Brandsetter's importance came not just from his sexuality but, according to Bill Mohr, Associate Professor at California State University, the fact that his life and the way Hansen wrote about him was a conscious repudiation of the eroticisation of homosexuality that marked so much previous crime fiction. As Mohr stated in a 2014 article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: 'Hansen's writing pushes back and rectifies that error while simultaneously ratifying the tactile bond in human companionship' (Mohr 2014).

*The Dirty Little Dog* contains this same push back. Linked to this, another noteworthy aspect of the novel is the complete absence of any bifurcation between the personal and work lives of Rutherford and Bradley. There is a very real and intimate sense of the lived reality of their fraught relationship and the impact of the, at times, dangerous work they pursue – physical and mental – on their bodies and the intimacy between them. As Fisher writes:

> While Jack was fighting off rats in the muddy pits of his Cambodian cell, Terry had been fighting Koori street kids, Lebanese drug dealers and Samoan stand-over men. His Constable's uniform was often ripped and dirtied, and his body lacerated and battered, but he won more than he lost, which helped (70).

Fisher is doubtless aware of the parallels to Hansen. At one point in *The Dirty Little Dog*, after Pup is given temporary shelter in Rutherford and Bradley's apartment, he asks his hosts:

> "And do you mind if I read a book?" He'd already checked out the shelves where Joseph Hansen leant against Andrew Holleran, Dean Kiley and Kevin Killian shared a shelf, and

> Amistead Maupin and Frank Moorhouse were uneasily aligned. (57)

Bradley and Rutherford have to contend with violence, sleaze and homophobia. In the Sydney they inhabit, gay identity (and it is gay men that are the subject of the book) must be kept a secret at any costs. Failure to do so can lead to being marked as a pariah and worse. While it is tempting to suggest that, at times, Fisher makes too much of this straight-gay conflict, the continuing opposition to marriage equality from a significant section of Australian society, amongst many other overt examples of homophobia, indicates otherwise.

The one reservation I have with *The Dirty Little Dog* as a crime novel is the balance between showing and telling. While the prose style is competent, the book contains numerous long descriptive passages, usually character backstories, which, while often interesting, slow the plot down and take away some of the mystery. If, as author and lecturer Andrew Pepper contends, crime fiction is on the whole read 'more for what uncertainties it provokes that the security it provides' (Pepper 2000: 71), *The Dirty Little Dog* does a little too much of the reader's work for them.

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*Andrew Nette is a writer of fiction and non-fiction. His second novel,* Gunshine State, *has just been released. He is currently undertaking a PhD at Macquarie University on the history of Australian pulp paperback publishing. His on-line home is www.pulpcurry.com.*

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# Expert detection

## *review by Ben Kunkler*


Liam Guilar
*Anhaga*
vanZeno Publishing, Berlin CT 2015
ISBN 9780983142614
Pb 140pp AUD25.00

In recent years, reviewers have noted the resurgence of narrative in Australian poetry. This trend continues in Liam Guilar's *Anhaga* – though Guilar's use (and playful misuse) of *genre* fiction is perhaps idiosyncratic. Guilar is as comfortable with crime fiction or vampire fantasy, as with vernacular, folk song, epic or poetic lyric. The result, however, is self-consciously clever. In the poem 'In the Park', for example, the well-used tropes of hard boiled detective narratives are parodied with comic rhyme 'I'm in the park, back in the fog / in my Bogart homburg' (22). In part two of the same poem, both the excesses of vampire literature and the sensationalist press are comically turned to hyperbole calmly viewed from the poet-speaker's point of view:

> Putting down the paper he begins:
> **Maniac at Large, Jack the Ripper Strikes in Local Park.**
> *At the second death forensics find no footprints*
> *leading to or from exsanguinated corpse.*
> **Is There a Vampire In Our City?** (23)

The use of boldface and italics – elsewhere capitalisation *and* boldface – **BLOODLESS BODY FOUND IN PARK!** (6) **–** is indicative of the multi-vocal quality of the poems and Guilar's preference for intertextuality. The experimentation, the foregrounding of style, and the self-consciously allusive surface, makes *Anhaga* modernistic. (The collection begins with a long epigram from *The Wanderer*, the Old English poem, which frames the wandering of the protagonist – 'Anhaga' means 'Wanderer' in Anglo Saxon).Indeed, the (male) modernists are everywhere in *Anhaga,* even oppressively so. Pre-publication praise collected in the

book's jacket labels *Anhaga* Joycean, and this is not completely empty flattery, though other modernists – Eliot, Pound and Bunting – are pervasive.

The Joycean flexibility in style and genre extends to narrative perspective. The narrative point of view shifts from a lyric poet-speaker 'I'; to the monologue of the compellingly Satanic 'Mr. Normal' ('Mrs. Normal' has an excellent monologue too); to the ill-fated and victimised Laura; to the ekphrasis of cinema in the poem 'Freeze Frame #69', which seems to contain the lines the best sum up *Anhaga*'s poetics: 'The film is paused, no expert could detect / from this one frame, the story's genre' (50). 'Detect' is the *mot juste*; it's the reader's keyword for *Anhaga*. The narrative is an old-fashioned whodunit. But the narration-in-verse is fragmented (to the point of obliquity). And since the poet speaker might be mad, unable to distinguish his violent sexual fantasies from the sensationalised crime in the press, we cannot be sure who has done the deed. This is thematised in a poem set 'At the GPs' – 'There's a killer on the loose. How do I know / *That you're not him*?' (11) – and clarified in 'Male Shrink' when the poet-speaker, down-and-out, depressed, and incredulous, is relating his violent sexual fantasies to a hapless psychologist.

> Look, I say, I think I'm going mad. And
> sleeping isn't going to help. That's why
> I came here; my doctor said you were the one…
> He looks offended. How rude, to point out
> that the car he's flogging only has three wheels.
> I speak my nightmare, put it on the polished
> and it feels like shitting in the middle of the church
> or masturbating on the altar rail. He nods, looks
> at his watch. This fantasy of yours, astral projection
> just a biochemical distortion in the brain
> …
> you weren't in Toy Town at the time. Think
> gentle thoughts next time you get the urge
> masturbate. Or find a brothel or a willing partner (42-3, first ellipsis in original).

It is this theme, this rhythm, that defines *Anhaga* once you strip away all the sampling and selection (and the modernist poetics). The wandering exile that frames the collection figures the wandering of a lonely, sexless (and useless) masculinity. This is explicit in 'Sexual Textual Fantasy'. The poet-speaker is tutor and translator. A female student visits his bedsit, and finds the epigraphic text amid translation drafts:

> She points toward the pages scattered on my desk;
> 'Is that what you're translating?'
> 'No, that's Old English, it's *The Wanderer*.'
>
> That same smiling patience. As she bends forward
> notice the line beneath the blouse stretched tight,
> across the smooth plane of her back. Imagine.
>
> 'It's about a solitary man, bereft of home and kin
> forced to wander the ways of exile
> hoping to find someone who'll take him in.'
>
> 'God, you read such cheerful things.
> But haven't these been done before?'

> Whatever landfall marks this journey's end
> won't be the homecoming I was hoping for. (46-7)

At times, the theme of male sexual frustration is difficult to stomach in *Anhaga*: it tends to clichés (both literary and emotional), and leering, even at times misogynistic, descriptions of women.

If 'detect' defines the collection, so too does 'expert'. The modernist aesthetics of allusion makes *Anhaga* an 'expert detection'. In fact, if the collection as a whole evokes the spirit of any particular modernist, it is not Joyce, Eliot, or Bunting. Rather, Pound's spectre looms. *Anhaga*'s maximalism, its posture of bibliophilic collection, its rigorous unoriginality, even the tone of misanthropic bluster, recall the later, crankier *Cantos*. (Even a sense of fatigue with tradition, inescapable and oppressively ruinous, make the genre of modernist 'epic' prevail over the pastiches of crime, horror etc.).

But Pound considered his epic *Cantos* 'botched'. And an air of failure and the fatigue of ambition hang as much over *Anhaga'*s poet-speaker 'I' as it does over the poetry itself. Even the propulsion of the whodunit slackens. Too many narrative forks in the road stall forward movement. In this manner, *Anhaga's* epigram from Bunting's *Briggflats* seems rather apt, like a self-effacing warning: 'Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing' (1). This botching is summed up in the final poem, 'Oft Him Anhaga Are Gibebeth', which finally delivers on the loose translation of *The Wanderer* that the collection's title (and long epigram) promises, but which is sullied by awkward allusions to *The Waste Land*'s own allusions.

> There are no living trees here on this dirty, pebbled shore,
> where the wind pushes the cold
> across a world gone grey to its horizons.
> Musing on our journey's wreck
> and the Prince her brother's death
> I shivered at the water's edge (135).

'Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal', Eliot famously said. The effect above is not erudite theft, but mash-up, mimicry. (Elsewhere, *Prufrock* is similarly mimed.) Perhaps Guilar could have heeded Pound's sound advice to Eliot, on his pastiche of Pope, in one of his famously bossy edits of *The Wasteland*:

> Pope has done this so well, you cannot do it better … you
> cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than
> Pope – and you can't (Pound qtd in McIntire 2015: 125).

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*Ben Kunkler is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. He was the winner of the 2016 Affirm Press Prize.*

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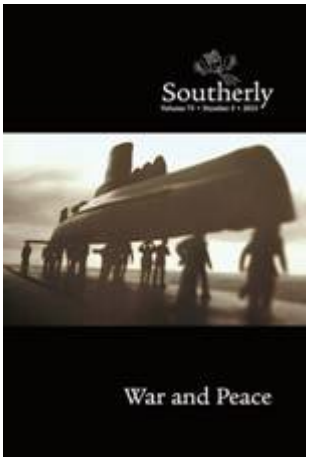
# In times of war

## *review by Ruby Todd*




*Southerly: War and Peace*
David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon (eds)
Volume 75, Number 3
Brandl & Schlesinger, Sydney NSW 2015
ISBN 9781921556913
Pb 256pp AUD29.95

A rich and varied collection of work attends *War and Peace*, *Southerly*'s final issue of 2015, which marks the centenary of World War I. While the essays, memoir, short fiction and poetry of this collection are all connected broadly by the subject of war, the diversity of their themes and preoccupations speaks to the way that war touches everything in its movement through time and space.

The pervasiveness of this movement is evoked on both a structural and narrative level in Brook Emery's poem, 'The brown current', in which languorous first-person references to contemporary coastal Sydney are interrupted by text fragments in third-person which detail a succession of human conflicts. These fragments, indented from the main text and centred, suggest the predictability and continuity of human war as a mobile force, which can be tracked from antiquity to the present through its impact on society and history. These fragments speak of the Third Punic War in the first century BC, the bloodbaths of frontier Australia, and the Rwandan massacres of 1994, and other conflicts. The final fragment, which references the attacks of September 11 and the consequent US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, acknowledges the contingency of the recent staged withdrawals: 'We may soon be back' (70).

As elsewhere in this issue, a tone of absurdity and stupefaction in contemplation of war, and its motivations and costs, runs through Emery's poem. One fragment, detailing North American frontier conflicts 'which cost the lives of 19,000 whites and 30,000 Indians', concludes pointedly: 'This was manifest destiny' (64). The poem also conveys a pervasive

sense of the hubris of warmongers: 'One million people were killed at the sacking of Urgench. Ghengis [sic] Khan styled himself "the flail of god"' (64); 'Ten million died. Leopold never set foot in the Congo' (65). At the same time, this poem speaks to the suspect nature of the historical record and the persistence of those who would collude in history's inventions and elisions: 'More than 20,000 Aboriginals may have perished [in Australia's colonial wars] though pedants insist this number is a fabrication' (64); 'Officially [the Armenian genocide] never happened' (66).

Emery's recourse to numerical tallies in testifying to lives lost in war is echoed in the title of Anne M Carson's poem, 'Of the 2,700: one voice'. Carson's poem narrates a cattle train journey of Holocaust survivors in a collective voice like a Greek chorus, thus lending immediacy and particularity to the vagueness and remove of recorded numbers: 'when the cattle-truck train doors / are finally opened, light floods / in, dazing us' (169). Another poem, Lorraine McGuigan's 'Questions', attempts to approach the confounding emotional and political realities of suicide bombing by focusing on the singular figure of 'a ten-year old with death under her robe' who 'split[s] in two' (141) when the bomb she is wearing explodes.

Peter Dickinson's short story, 'Eye into Eye', testifies at once to the resonance of wartime experience which bears on bodies and landscapes long after combat ends, and to the difficulty of recalling the individuality of those killed. The story narrates a soldier's memories of a 1990 UN mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Gulf War, in which he witnessed at close range the fatal shooting of a Pakistani army official. In recalling the official's death, the narrator observes that, '[t]hough the sound of this shot will chase me through time', inevitably '[t]he span of years will serve to erase this individual. He will fade into something seen at a distance, something remote that cannot touch me: a head in a mirage' (73). The above admission underscores how the lived experience of war is subject to the elisions of memory, which over time enacts its own slow destruction in the blurring of precise details to arrive at a broader, more general narrative, which risks reducing individuals and their immediate traumas to impersonal facts and numbers.

The impossibility of quantifying or making sense of loss or destruction which seems senseless, to which so many of these works attest, is powerfully captured through a more personal lens by Kate Fagan's crystalline poem, 'Shadow the Spring'. As an elegy for the late poet and academic Martin Harrison, who died of natural causes in 2014, Fagan's poem is less directly about war than it is about the difficulty of signifying loss through words, and about the strange resonance of the dead's presence for those who mourn them. In the absence of the elegy's subject, everything in the immediate environment of the speaker which remains extant seems to take on urgency and to refer metonymically to the lost one, from the morning itself, 'full / of your death', to 'a burnt saucepan, / forgotten on the stove when lunch / drew out like a bow / and we shot arrows of talk' (154). Like death, war endures, and, as Emery's speaker proclaims, '[t]he immeasurable, the / unanswerable,/ keeps breaking in' (69). Susan Adams' poem, 'Red Horizon', which commemorates the ANZACs, similarly attests to the all-pervasiveness and persistence of war's effects on the living, suggesting that '[m]emory is a meadow that flows into a road / then grows into the backdrop of every new thing' (10).

Alongside this vibrant selection of poetry and fiction are some deeply thoughtful essays and memoir. Robin Gerster's 'Our Ground Zero: Future

Wars and the Imagined Destruction of Australia's Cities' traces the ongoing psychic reverberations of nuclear capacity since the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Gerster discusses the stupefying totality of nuclear capability, which in 'the anticipation of its palpable possibility' (15) has already enacted the violence of colonising Australia's 'imaginative landscape' (16). In 'Aileen Palmer: Political Activist and "poet of conscience"', Sylvia Martin explores the personal costs of Palmer's preparedness to act on her political and moral beliefs by fighting fascism in revolutionary Spain. Elsewhere, Nina Seja's memoir 'The White Fox Remembers its History' testifies to the ruthlessness of history and human progress by vividly detailing memories of the author's Siberian grandmother who was a prisoner of war, as well as the ongoing destruction of the ancestral habitat of the white fox. In 'Wanted for War', Michael Hamel-Green recalls his experience of being imprisoned for resisting the Vietnam War as a non-complier: despite his deprivations his action constituted a 'small victory' – withholding from battle 'one less instrument' in 'a particularly indefensible war' (120).

From a myriad of vantage points, these works and others too numerous to mention in this review, point to the ways that war excludes nothing from its frame of reference – the time and space it traverses is at once personal and historical, local and global, psychic and physical. As this issue of *Southerly* resolutely attests, the need to remember, record and debate war across a multitude of registers continues, however difficult the task.

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**TEXT**
**Vol 20 No 2 October 2016**
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