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Reviews contents

TEXT review

Did anyone mention the marketplace?

review by Jeremy Fisher

Dianne Donnelly and Graeme Harper (eds)
Key Issues in Creative Writing
Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK 2012
ISBN 978-1-84769-846-9
Pb 208pp GBP19.96

This volume, edited by Dianne Donnelly and Graeme Harper who are both establishing significant profiles in research on creative writing, offers some topics of worth. Both editors contribute two chapters each and collaborate on the introduction and conclusion. Other chapters come from Mimi Thebo, Steve Healey, Katharine Haake, Stephanie Vanderslice, Indigo Perry, Nigel McLoughlin and Patrick Bizzaro. Indigo Perry's and Graeme Harper's Australian connections are the most significant Antipodean contribution to this book, though Donnelly and Harper, in particular, both refer to Australian research in their chapters and, happily, it is not ignored by other writers. The teaching of creative writing in the US, the UK and Australia is consistently referred to, so the book offers quite a bit for Australian readers.

The introduction and chapter one examine the history and development of creative writing courses in tertiary institutions, with chapter one, by Donnelley, taking a more theoretical approach. Given her interest in the use of the workshop model in teaching creative writing, it is only natural she spends some time on this matter. She also considers the options for graduates of creative writing programmes in terms of teaching and other opportunities, and offers an interesting discussion of the significant economic role of creative industries as well as a short analysis of the global community for teaching creative writing.

In chapter two, on the history of creative writing programs, Mimi Thebo writes: 'We do not expect Creative Writing BA students to become professional writers any more than we expect English Literature BA

students to become professional critics' (37). I think this is specious. My major problem with this is finally addressed, but not answered, on the third last page: 'whether creative writing, as we have come to know it around our higher education institutions, is different in activity, attitudes and/or outcomes to creative writing undertaken outside of our higher education institutions' (178). The chapter makes no engagement with writing as a profession or publishing as the principal industry within which professional writers work, something that I regard as the key issue for the teaching of writing in institutes of higher education. There is no point in producing students who can write if we do not give them knowledge of the environment in which they might be expected to live on the earnings from the skills and techniques we have taught them. If we do not address this core problem, we are failing our students, our institutions and those who would be their audiences. However, Thebo goes some way to offering a context for creative writing – that is, creative writing is only one aspect of the writing skills a professional writer is required to have. To narrow the teaching of writing only to creative writing limits opportunities for students, as much as, say, limiting English Literature only to coverage of Shakespeare and Victorian literature.

Mimi Thebo also attempts an analysis of the teaching of creative writing in universities, but I found the variations in style and approach confusing. Greater editorial rigour might have brought about a stronger chapter.

Harper discusses creative writing habitats in chapter three, however I found this personal piece self-indulgent and at odds with the scholarly tone of the introduction and chapter one. Writers write in all sorts of places and situations over a lifetime. At times, this might influence their writing; at others, it may not.

In chapter four, Steve Healey examines creative literacy, the term he gives 'to the skills and experiences that students can gain from taking a creative writing class and that they can apply to a broad range of activities and jobs beyond the classroom'. This merges well with my own vision of enhancing students' cultural literacy, and with the sound pedagogical practice of incorporating an understanding and appreciation of the past into the present. Healy also offers some analysis of career paths available to his students as a result of their enhanced creative literacy.

I regret that I failed to comprehend the point or the purpose of Katharine Haake's chapter five. She claims to investigate the question of genre, but the more I read the more confused I became. I'm still puzzling over this sentence: 'A both/and formulation depends on the original either/or, but maybe a neither/nor doesn't' (93).

Chapter six, in which Harper examines creative writing research, reflects current Australian concerns about the place and measurement of non-traditional research outputs in Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). Harper maps the terrain and provides a clear overview of the challenges involved in assessing the research dimensions of creative practice. The chapter maintains its promise and is one of the book's most useful contributions.

Donnelly considers creative writing knowledge in chapter seven. The chapter begins with an epigraph from Australians Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady, an indication of the depth of Donnelly's reading on this topic. This is a very useful chapter that summarises what it is we actually teach when we offer creative writing courses. Even so, there is a tone of self-

justification, a sense that the teaching of creative writing continues to have to be verified, when the evidence is abundant that this is not so.

Part 2 of the book is comprised of chapters 8, 9 and 10, the last being in two parts, followed by the conclusion. This section looks towards the near, or perhaps present, future. I liked Stephanie Vanderslice's digital competencies outlined in chapter eight, but these should be additional skills for writers, not replacement skills. We should not reject our printed past for an unedited, transient digital future.

Indigo Perry offers a straightforward history of the teaching of creative writing in Australian universities in chapter nine. To my mind, it would have benefited from a greater range of reference material, but as a personal viewpoint it was interesting.

The final chapter offers two approaches to designing a creative writing program from Nigel McLoughlin and Patrick Bizzaro. These are useful and thoughtful contributions.

The book, as a whole, might have drawn a greater connection between the chapters and topics, as it seems to be missing a central, unifying editorial theme. Nevertheless there is some interesting material here, though perhaps not enough to make this book an essential purchase. The book does address some key issues, but also a few that are somewhat peripheral.

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TEXT review

A decidedly human event

review by Dallas J Baker

Graeme Harper (ed)
Inside Creative Writing: Interviews with Contemporary Writers
Palgrave MacMillan, London 2012
ISBN 9780230212176
Pb 213pp AUD29.95

Inside Creative Writing: Interviews with Contemporary Writers, by Graeme Harper, features interviews with high profile writers, including Philip Pullman, Nadine Gordimer, Kate Grenville, Robert Pinsky and Ian Banks about their writing practices and processes. Designed as a resource for other creative writers, the book encompasses subjects ranging from motivation to creativity, planning, and the various stages of writing itself.

Inside Creative Writing deviates from a number of other texts about writing by seeking answers to key questions about writing *as a practice*. Rather than looking at 'the completed works of creative writers' (1) to understand writing practice, Harper investigates the acts and processes that writers employ as they engage in their craft. Harper justifies this by arguing that 'creative writing does not begin with these works: creative writing does not begin where it ends' (1).

Harper explains that *Inside Creative Writing* is about the 'human activity of creative writing' (1) and the knowledge that informs and sustains this human activity. Harper's approach is simple: ask a range of writers, both established and emerging, the same questions about their writing practice and the ways that they approach or support their work. These questions are diverse in their scope: the authors first reflect on their earliest motivations for wanting to write; the final question asks how they feel about the future of writing in our rapidly changing social and technological environment.

At the heart of many of the questions however is the underlying importance of creativity. How to understand and discuss creativity emerges as a key thread to Harper's book. Many of the questions attempt

to elucidate what creativity means in the context of a writing life: is it an inborn talent or a learned behaviour? Does it rely on certain behaviours or acts more than on others? How does one sustain creativity and/or enhance it?

Surprisingly, there is a significant coherence between the answers to these and other questions among the selected authors. Although the authors use varying ways to describe their views on writing and creativity, on close reading there is much agreement from one writer to another. To my mind, this points to the now general agreement among professional (non-academic) creative writers on many practice related questions. After all, professional authors are asked to discuss their practice ad infinitum in television interviews and at writers' festivals. The result is that a discourse has emerged which is based on their own private writing experience reinforced by their peer's private writing experience. I wonder, however, whether or not the personal experience of writers is enough to provide real critical insight into the practice of writing.

Having said that, for the most part, *Inside Creative Writing* does provide a lot of very useful, articulate and fresh information. The book offers valuable insights into how successful writers work and reveals that certain commonalities among these writers' processes may be components in that success. Much of the value of this book lies in Harper's astute analysis and handling of the interview material. His understanding of the domain of creative writing means that the answers of the writers are organised and contextualised in a way that brings out the subtleties and richness in the responses. In this sense, Harper brings to the discussion the level of critical rigour needed to understand the complexity of writing behaviour.

Inside Creative Writing does however point to the need for more evidence-based research into writing practice and creativity that goes beyond personal or professional accounts. This is not a criticism of Harper's book per se, but rather a criticism of the methodological approaches dominant in the discipline. Creative writing needs to address these debates with not only theoretical and creative responses. It is my opinion that the discipline needs to embrace more rigorous, evidence-based approaches as well. This is highlighted by the discussion on creativity in *Inside Creative Writing*. This discussion shows that many of the authors interviewed have not looked very deeply into creativity and hold largely unexamined views on the subject. This is the weakness inherent in relying principally on subjective assessments rather than evidence of a more rigorous kind. Take these responses about creativity from Ian Banks and Jack Epps Jr. as an example:

> 'As usual in such matters, it's partly something you're born with and something you can choose to develop as a skill.' – Ian Banks (55)

> 'I think creativity comes from letting go and not thinking.... Young writers should rely on their instincts. You can build instincts by watching the right movies, reading a ton of screenplays, but eventually you have to believe in your instincts and trust them.' – Jack Epps Jr. (57)

Here we see both Banks and Epps agreeing that creativity is an inborn quality that can then be developed. This seems to me to fly in the face of current evidence-based research on creativity (Sawyer 2006). This evidence-based research suggests that creativity is a wholly learned

capability (Baker 2011). Creativity is not an inborn talent or some kind of genius (Baker 2011) that merely needs to be honed. It's an acquired skill. The evidence also maintains that creativity is not a solitary endeavour but a highly social one that is far more outward than inward looking (Sawyer 2006). Many of the authors imply exactly the opposite. I interpret this as indicating that the consensus of professional (non-academic) authors is based on some unexamined assumptions. Clearly there are limits to relying on practitioners like Banks and Epps, intelligent and extremely skilled writers though they are, to understand creativity. This is not to say that non-academic writers cannot understand creativity, just that to understand creativity, writers, and especially academic writers, need to look beyond their own personal experience. For these reasons, I would have liked Harper to interview some noted academics from both the creative writing discipline and creativity research.

On the whole, *Inside Creative Writing* is a valuable resource that provides an insightful discussion on core topics in the Creative Writing discipline. Harper is always at the leading edge of thinking within the discipline and his comments and analysis of the interview responses are erudite, insightful and, yes, creative. It is also an exceedingly well-written and articulate work. *Inside Creative Writing* should therefore be on the must read list of any academic or student in the discipline.

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Dr Dallas J Baker is an academic teaching and researching in creative writing and cultural studies in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. He is also a writer with creative work published in a number of journals and anthologies. His book, America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South *was published in 2011.*

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TEXT review

Communication and reflection are the keys

review by Sue Bond

Carl Vandermeulen
Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing
Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK, 2011
ISBN: 9781847694379
Pb 229pp GBP30.00

The core message of *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* is that teachers and students need to maintain communication in order for the teaching to be most effective, and the author gives numerous examples of how to do this throughout. The personal components of the teacher-student relationship cannot be neglected if students are to develop fully as writers.

Carl Vandermeulen is based at the University of Wisconsin and has taught writing, photography, and teacher education. His book is another in the series New Writing Viewpoints, edited by Graeme Harper, and aimed at teachers and researchers.

In the introduction Vandermeulen explains why he wrote *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing*. He taught a poetry class that he thought would be successful, but failed miserably because there was a mismatch between his role as teacher and evaluator in that particular class, and his previous role as something quite different, an advisor and advocate. The clash of the personal with the impersonal produced a situation where not only the writing work suffered, but the relationships were strained. Vandermeulen advocates the advice of Tom C Hunley who teaches creative writing at Western Kentucky University, and whom he cites: that 'introductory courses need to focus on fundamental – and personal – kinds of growth that enable the process of writing and of becoming a writer' (x, which cites Hunley 2007).

The book is divided into nine chapters covering influences on teaching, workshops, reflection, writers' groups, teacher response, authority,

relationship problems, grading, and the identity of the writer. Part of Vandermeulen's research for this text was a survey sent out to 150 creative writing teachers in the Midwestern states of America, asking them to reflect on their own teaching practices.

Vandermeulen draws on the experience of a key group of writing teachers: Patrick Bizzaro and William Stafford, Richard Hugo, Donald Murray, Wendy Bishop, Katharine Haake, Peter Elbow, Lad Tobin and Robert Brooke, all of whom he quotes throughout *Negotiating*. William Stafford, who died in 1993, was an award-winning poet who taught at Lewis and Clark College until his retirement. Hugo was also a well known poet and teacher who wrote the influential book on writing, *The Triggering Town*. Murray was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, who, like Hugo, served in WWII and wrote of his experiences. Another poet, Bishop taught at Florida State University, particularly in rhetoric and composition. Bizzaro, Haake, Elbow, Tobin and Brooke all teach at tertiary level, Bizzaro also writing poetry and Brooke being Director of the Nebraska Writing Project.

In the first chapter Vandermeulen considers the influences on teaching – of the teacher's experience as student and writer and reader, of colleagues, of students – and wonders why pedagogy is not afforded more value. He believes that 'trying to teach without pedagogy is like trying to live without literature' (9), that it 'helps teachers to become spectators of their forms of participation in their students' learning' (9), and that it needs to be specific to creative writing. Regular assessment of and reflection upon the practices of both teachers and students are key themes in his book.

In the next chapter Vandermeulen proceeds to discuss in detail the role of the workshop for creative writing courses, including the benefits and drawbacks. The most interesting points made are that the reader-response model – responses of readers to a writer's work – may be more useful than critiques, and that a dialogue between the writers and their readers is important. This adapts Lerman's model for artists (Lerman & Borstel 2003), in which it is the artists themselves who ask questions of their responders in order to gain feedback rather than critique, and where each responder wants the artist to produce excellent work. Liz Lerman, a choreographer, calls her model the 'critical response process'. The model places emphasis on collaboration and taking the progress of the work as seriously as the finished product.

The reflective process is given its own chapter, so important does the author consider it in the teaching of writing and the development of the writer. Kathleen Yancey is Professor of English at Florida State University and director of their graduate program in rhetoric and communication, and Vandermeulen uses her definition of reflection which emphasises it as dialectical (Yancey 1998), a dialogue between the writer and the teacher about what the work currently is and what the writer wants it to be (49). In this process, there is attention paid to the multiple selves of the developing writer: inner writing self, ideal or hero self, and guide self. The guide self, as the name suggests, guides or 'negotiates between the writing self and the ideal self' (58), where the ideal self is what drives the 'quest for perfection that drives revision' (58). The teacher can use various methods to help with this development, including the writer's memo, encouraging regular writing, and providing stimulating writing exercises.

Vandermeulen appraises writers' groups, and the techniques that are constructive for students, such as using reader-response rather than criticism or praise, and encouraging the long-term view by emphasising

the development of students as writers rather than focusing purely on a single piece of work.

The next chapters address how teachers apply the aforementioned techniques in their practice. Vandermeulen particularly addresses problems between students and their teachers arising from conflict between the teacher as supporter and the teacher as figure of authority. There are concerns with both being too familiar and too distant and the balance can be difficult to achieve, particularly when assessment and a grade is required. His last chapter, 'Constructing the Practice and Identity of "Writer"' is useful for beginning writers as well as teachers, as it covers 'the habit of art', as he quotes from Flannery O'Connor (197). Journal keeping, work habits, recording our thinking about our writing, being observant, the need for solitude, constructive reflection, and specific research practices (e.g. reading as writers) are each discussed.

There is a cornucopia of information here for the teacher of creative writing, backed up by the experience of not only the author but also a large sample of teachers, albeit all American. A useful list of references is provided, but unfortunately no index. *Negotiating* is accessibly written without too much jargon; a true workbook for those wishing to improve their teaching and interaction with students as developing writers.

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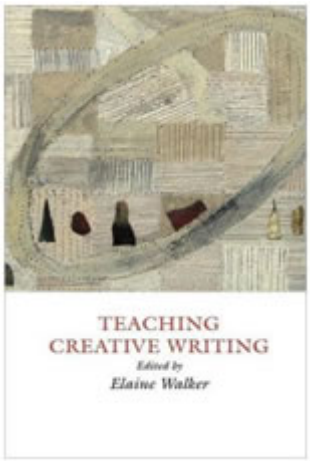
TEXT review

Yoga on the page: Teaching creative writing

review by Helen Gildfind



Elaine Walker (ed)
Teaching Creative Writing
Creative Writing Studies Imprint
The Professional and Higher Partnership Ltd, UK 2012
ISBN 9781907076121
Hb 234pp GBP67.50

This book is a compilation of writing exercises from creative writing teachers all over the world, and is aimed at 'enabling' other teachers to 'review, borrow and adapt ideas' for their own practice. This text is logically and accessibly organised with each contributor introducing and detailing their exercise over a few pages, with a clear explanation of the exercise's structure and objective. Each passage is contextualised by its author's completion of the first exercise in the book, namely Elaine Walker's 'ice-breaker' exercise; this she uses as a 'getting to know you' activity for new classes. Though this is not quite a 'how to write' book, and not quite a 'how to teach writing' book, it indirectly offers useful insights into both of these practices whilst primarily acting as a 'go to' book for new and experienced teachers who need original ideas on how to create and structure writing exercises in imaginative and purposeful ways.

This is not the kind of book you read cover to cover, and one of its most useful aspects is its 'Thematic Index' which allows readers to identify exercises that cater for a particular need ('Confidence Building and Ice Breakers', 'Developing Writing Practice'), a particular genre ('Flash Fiction', 'Food Writing', 'Song Writing'), a particular skill ('Editing and Redrafting', 'Creating Structure in Short Stories'), or a particular student level ('New Students', 'All Stages', 'Confident Writers'). This index also allows readers to quickly identify exercises of a particular time-duration, with activities ranging from less than an hour to several weeks. As I used this index to locate exercises that I might find useful in my own classes –

especially those classes that did not work out as well as I'd hoped – what struck me most was just how much we ask of our students. It is so easy to come up with an activity for someone else to do, but – by positioning teachers on the receiving-end of teaching – this text reminds us just how intense, confronting and difficult writing classes can be for students. It is a definite strength of this book that it emphasises the care and clarity needed for good teaching, with its detailed contributions acting as model lesson-plans. Without stating it, this text reminds teachers to keep out of the classroom until they know what they are doing and, most importantly, why they are doing it.

The exercises in this book vary widely, and most could be easily adapted to suit a range of student needs and backgrounds. Martyn Bedford's exercise 'Travel writing – from classroom to Khartoum' illustrates how ostensibly simple activities such as basic note-taking, memory exercises, discussion, and the strategic use of secondary sources, can help students move in two hours from questioning the value of their own experiences to establishing the foundations of a substantial piece of writing.

Diana Chin-a-Fat helps students 'get into character' by asking them to imagine past the public personas of celebrities in order to delve imaginatively into the deeper darker secrets that might lurk in their minds. By producing monologues and sharing them, her students learn about perceptions, assumptions, public personas and the credibility of voice.

Allene Nichols combats student shyness and perfectionism by getting them to 'write a bad poem'. In the process she teaches them to embrace – as all writers must – writing 'badly', whilst also teaching them the 'vocabulary' of poetry that will enable them to both write and critique poetry in the future.

Ian Williams focuses on the long-term skills his students will need by helping them to establish a 'daily writing habit'. He gets his 'young warriors' to post a new poem on an interactive online forum everyday for 30 days. Steve May also uses technology to re-envision traditional workshopping methods in the belief that paper print-outs give students a false sense of completion with their work. He finds collaborative editing onscreen assists students to shed preciousness and recognise writing as an ongoing process. He notes how onscreen work can allow classes to write collaboratively or even edit the published works of famous writers.

Other contributors use yoga and meditation to ease students into writing tasks, or conjure 'creative mayhem' by getting students to collaborate in the writing of manifestos, or guide students in their struggle to create credible narrative voices for children.

As all these examples suggest, the exercises in this text are applicable for student writers at any level of experience and across a range of genres. Nearly all of the activities have been structured with an acute awareness that student writers need a relaxed and trusting classroom atmosphere in order to gain skill and confidence with their work, and most contributors seem equally aware that the best way to get students writing is to focus them on 'process' rather than 'product'.

Teaching Creative Writing is obviously well suited to teachers of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and plays. It offers a practical resource for teachers who are just starting out and lack the confidence or ideas required to create truly engaging classes. This book might even be useful for experienced

teachers who suspect that their own methods have become repetitive and uninspiring, or who sense complacency creeping in to their classrooms through the stultifying effects of their own habits. Less obviously, this text has value for teachers because it emphasises and models the care required to structure classes in an engaging and purposeful manner. The book may even benefit creative writers themselves, for its huge bank of activities offer a means for writers to recover from writer's block, by providing defamiliarising writing tasks.

Helen Gildfind lives in Melbourne and has had reviews, essays, short stories and poetry published in Australia and overseas. She is currently completing a collection of short stories with the aid of an Australia Council Arts Grant.

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TEXT review

Flying high

review by Laurie Hergenhan

Leonie Kramer
Broomstick: Personal Reflections of Leonie Kramer
Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne 2012
ISBN: 978-1-9221875-84-7
Pb 222pp AUD49.95

This book does not belong to the genre of memoir or autobiography as one might expect from the title, though it draws selectively on both. Its genesis, described in a Preface by Kramer's two daughters, is complicated. Kramer began work on the book on retirement in 2002, intending to write a series of essays on educational change, based on some sixty years experience in the field, but she later decided to include 'some of her personal history … intended only as the context for the ideas, not the substance of the book' (ix). Later still, 'the project evolved to become broader than a personal view of educational changes' (ix). The altering conception of the work was further complicated by the onset of the author's dementia. This left her daughters and friends to finalise publication.

Kramer's highly selective 'personal history' is limited to an outline of her growing up in Kew, Melbourne; her education at Presbyterian Ladies' College; her university studies at Melbourne, specialising in literature and philosophy; and her doctorate at Oxford, which allowed for student travels around Britain and 'the continent'. This history is obviously not intended to be in-depth. Kramer alludes to her challenges in writing personal reminiscences, by offering as exemplar of the genre, the autobiography of Hal Porter: he uses 'the language and rhythms of poetry; while the rest of us have only the inadequate equipment of plain prose' (13). Kramer's aim is to record rather than to recreate. Hence, while possessing the virtues of lucidity and straightforwardness, the narrative of *Broomstick* lacks vividness and inwardness. The overall tone is detached and reticent.

Curiously Kramer leaves out much that is personal. Her two daughters are mentioned only on their arrival in the world as babies. The daughters supply a biographical note on their father, a distinguished medico, adding that Kramer 'could not have achieved what she did without her late husband's encouragement and quiet unobtrusive presence' (xi). Indeed, any suggestion of personal narrative is dropped half way through the book in favour of a series of essays covering Kramer's public career. Two comments arise: why did such context become unimportant? Moreover, Kramer's public life is not notable for originality of 'ideas', either on education or literature, her two main fields. Her middle class background and education up to and including Oxford might be seen as the story of the making of a conservative. If expressed with flair, it is a conservatism of the conventional kind:

From the 1960's onwards, the word

> conservative became a pejorative term, and those of us who challenged the progressive movement were caricatured as people afraid of change, determined to freeze the past and to allow its mistakes to disappear from memory, so as better to retain only the sentimentalised dream of an imagined paradise lost. In fact, we conservatives were reformers, and our opponents did not recognise that the concept of conservatism was an intellectual position with a distinguished philosophical history. (24)

This statement typifies Kramer's combative nature, a tendency to see life in terms of 'them' and 'us'. Increasingly, after the changes of the 1970's, which she disparages, many came to see her conservatism as reactionary. She makes no allowance for this in her defensive accounts of her loss of the Chancellorship of the Sydney University and of chairmanship of the ABC. These two turning points of her life serve to 'bookend' *Broomstick*, and they are defiantly blamed on others.

If Kramer's ideas were not original her public expression of them, in print and on TV, was outstandingly effective so that she became an influential public figure. Admirers were impressed by the elegant, lucid and detached expression of her views. She was witty (at times mischievous), coolly logical, even steely, as well as articulate and agile in debate – a doughty combatant. Kramer sat on numerous boards and committees.

An impressive list of these, covering the worlds of business and culture, is provided in her daughters' condensed 'Biographical Notes'. How did Kramer cope with all these demands? Her daughters' answer is: 'Leonie chose to accept every invitation that came her way' (x). Yet, generous as she may have been, she obviously welcomed these requests because they provided outlets for exercising her persuasive powers and influence. More an outstanding committee person than a scholar, for a long timed she was one of the few women fulfilling such a public role, beginning as Professor of Australian literature in 1968. She was not, however, a feminist.

It is interesting to note what is omitted from the list of her public achievements. As well as introducing the first major in Australian literature at Sydney University against fierce opposition, she and writer-academic Professor Michael Wilding introduced the first Australian university course in Australia in creative writing, in the 1970s. Kramer used her influence to delay the decision of the Literature Board to cut off its subsidy to Australian Literary Studies, the first scholarly journal in the

field. Such undisclosed interventions may not be among Kramer's major achievements but they do show that she took her custodial role seriously.

Broomstick is restricted by the circumstances of its composition and by the limits its author set herself. The book nevertheless has much to offer future biographers and social historians.

Laurie Hergenhan, emeritus professor of Australian literature, University of Queensland, edited Australian Literary Studies *from its inception in 1963 until 2001. 2013 marks its 50th year.*

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TEXT review

A verse novel packed with poignancy

review by Elizabeth Claire Alberts

Lisa Jacobson
The Sunlit Zone
Five Islands Press, Melbourne 2012
ISBN 9780734047465
Pb 165pp AUD29.95

Contemporary verse novels tend to explore powerful emotional events, and Lisa Jacobson's *The Sunlit Zone* is no exception. This is a story of love and loss, grief and healing, trauma and transformation. It is the story of North, a woman who flounders in sadness like someone drowning in the deepest part of the ocean. In order to heal her wounds, she must find a way to surface into the sunlit zone.

In her article, 'Vetting the Verse Novel', Patty Campbell argues that the narrative structures of most verse novels differ from prose novels. 'Characteristically,' Campbell writes, 'the action centers on an emotional event, and the rest of the novel deals with the character's feelings before and after' (Campbell 2004: 614). Campbell is specifically referring to young adult verse novels, and *The Sunlit Zone* is written for an adult readership. However, Jacobson's text shares this attribute with its young adult counterpart.

North, a thirty-something marine biologist living in Australia in a speculative future, narrates *The Sunlit Zone*. The major emotional event is the disappearance of North's twin sister, Finn, who gets swept into the ocean while in North's care. The story is set in the year 2050, but every even-numbered chapter dips back to the past as North confronts her memories surrounding Finn's presumed drowning. The second chapter, for instance, recounts North and Finn's birth (more imagining than remembering on North's part). North is born a healthy child, but Finn is delivered in a 'furry caul' with a 'thread wound tight' around her neck

(21), and evolves into a strange hybrid creature – part girl, part sea-being with gills and barnacles, and a predilection for water. The analeptic chapters ascend from 2020 to 2039, recounting the sisters' childhood, adolescence, and then North's college years after Finn vanishes. The flashbacks provide striking comparisons to North's adult life, which is tinged with loneliness. North spends much of her time working at the lab, although she occasionally visits her friends and her ageing parents.

The Sunlit Zone is packed with emotion, but the book doesn't lapse into sentimentalism, and the narrative never lags. Jacobson uses evocative images to create suspense and a sense of foreboding. The second chapter ends with a startling discovery about Finn, which would make most readers eager to flip the page:

> as Finn wriggled, Mum took her feet,
> caught her fingernail on a flap of skin
> and found between my sister's toes
> thin webs, shell-pink and delicate. (29)

The Sunlit Zone depicts many life experiences to which readers will surely relate: childbirth, first love, break-ups, the death of a parent, and a myriad of awkward coming-of-age moments. What resonated with me the most, however, was the environmental message. In North's world, the natural world is in dire straits. A tensile wall holds back the rising sea. Weather has become increasingly erratic, causing Queenslanders to flee 'fearing more tsunamis' (17). A 'desalination plant casts a green / light on a continent of gleaming sand' (13). Technology and consumerism have spiraled out of control. The oceans are filled with GM replicas of extinct species. There are designer babies, designer dogs, and 'skinfones' embedded in everyone's wrists. At times, Jacobson's constant references to these futuristic phenomena seem more ornamental than necessary to the story, but they vivify this strange new world, making an enthralling read.

> I sit amidst the rubble on my desk:
> heat sweets, God Junk, a lone earring,
> lilac pebbles from a resort beach.
> Words glimmer on my lobal screen
> I can't quite, almost, read.
> I refocus until the text solidifies,
> notations made in my brain scrawl. (11-12)

Jacobson's verse novel is 'speculative' by virtue of its futuristic setting and fantastical story elements. Nevertheless, the environmental concerns faced in the storyworld – concerns about climate change; invasive species; energy use; conservation; marine pollution; genetic engineering – will resonate with readers today.

The themes of *The Sunlit Zone* seem to penetrate more deeply because it is written in poetry. Jacobson writes in a flowing, accessible free verse that appears deceptively simple, but her careful selection and placement of words maximises meaning. In the following excerpt, the multiple meanings evoked by the word 'imprints' are reinforced by words like 'drawn,' 'scan' and 'photograph.' The land crab/ocean crab simile acts as a powerful comparison to the newborn twin girls in this scene, but also symbolises the differences that will eventually separate the two sisters.

> At dawn she'd drive to the hospital
> while Richard was asleep, drawn

back to us by imprints more precise
than any scan or photograph.
She saw us twinned but different,
as the land crab differs from its ocean
cousin. (22)

The expanse of white page that follows each line break, and the space that separates each numbered poetic section within every chapter, seem like a deliberate gesture, providing a place for the reader to momentarily pause and reflect upon the narrative and the poetic language.

It is hard to fault Jacobson's verse novel. Not only has she produced a text packed full of poignant poetry, she has also created a compelling narrative that speaks to the heart. *The Sunlit Zone* is Jacobson's first novel-in-verse, which she wrote as part of her PhD thesis at LaTrobe University. I'm sure many readers would agree with me when I say that I hope she writes many more.

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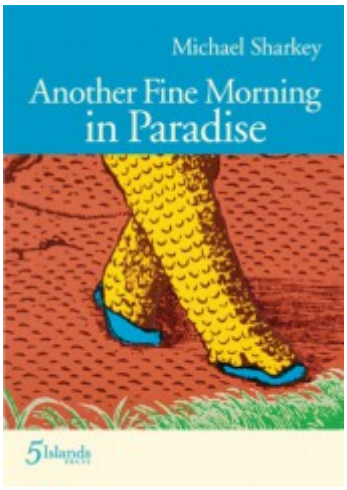
TEXT review

Droll musings from a compassionate poet

review by Jeremy Fisher



Michael Sharkey
Another Fine Morning in Paradise
5 Islands Press, Melbourne 2012
ISBN 978-0-7340-4745-8
Pb 100pp AUD24.95

First, a disclaimer: Michael Sharkey is a friend and former colleague. When I first came to the University of New England, Michael's office was directly opposite mine. We shared both jokes and tales of woe in the early mornings before the other members of the School had yet to appear in the corridors and tearoom. When he retired, my mornings were greyer, a little less delightful. I missed his erudite words and ironic tone.

Fortunately, I can console myself with *Another Fine Morning in Paradise*, a collection of poems that brings Sharkey's droll wit into sharp focus. But it is not only wit on show. As a colleague, Sharkey was always a pedant, and the precision of his poetry hones both the irony and satire. For example, in 'A double abecedary on tertiary teaching' he collects those early morning groans about lazy students we once shared and constructs a 26-line grumble with laughs. The wizardry of the verse almost obscures the poem's careful construction. Each line commences with letters in descending alphabetical order, while ending with letters in ascending order. For me, seeing such contrivances work is a delight, and testimony to Sharkey's skill and mastery of poetic techniques.

The book, a collection of poems previously published in a wide range of journals and publications, is organised into two parts: times out of mind; and life in common. The first part contains two poems, the first being 'The garden of earthly delights', a work with eight two-line stanzas that encapsulates the overall tone of the book as people 'took a vote and ended' paradise. There's a sentiment here that recalls Joni Mitchell's song 'Big yellow taxi' with its lines 'Don't it always seem to go/ that you don't

know what you've got/ 'til it's gone/ they paved paradise/ and put up a parking lot'. It is humans and their weaknesses that spoil the world for Sharkey.

The title of the next poem, 'The plain people of paradise', suggests the misanthropy that underlies this work. This poem has thirteen sections, most of which are constructed of seven two-line stanzas. In a number of these, Sharkey uses questions as a device. In the first section, 'Housekeeping', he asks:

> Who stores the missing limbs and faculties
> so kids who lob from Laos, Soudan, Serbia
>
> And elsewhere get to use their feet again?
> Does anybody get the parts mixed up like we do here? (12)

The section 'Office management' begins:

> Who's in charge of newlyweds and joy?
> How can the bureaucrats endure the endless schmaltz? (14)

While the previous poem brought a modern songwriter to mind, this poem references, amongst other things, Dean Swift, Zoroaster, Glen Murcutt, Hubert of Liege, Nauru, and Christmas Island; testimony to Sharkey's intellectual adroitness and curiosity. Those qualities shape further poems in the collection, some of which are wistful, others philosophical, and a few simply hilarious. 'Ode to shoes', for example, where Sharkey celebrates those 'comic objects' that we put on our feet. He follows this with the darker 'young woman with a tea towel'. It's a title that brings to mind a painted portrait, and the poem offers a picture of this young woman in searing detail. The tragedy of a failing relationship is etched with every word, especially in the final stanza:

> When she can manage, she'll drive to the park,
> stop the car under trees,
> and give way once again to her tears.
> He will tell her more lies. (29)

The poems tell little stories, sometimes obviously, as in 'Ancestors in nineteenth-century albums' and 'Nothing for granted', but more often subtly, as in 'The land of eternal verities: there you are, pet' and 'The good life when it happens'. These poems provoke and entertain. While I wonder how readers unfamiliar with Armidale and its environs would receive several poems, especially 'The custom of Cockaigne'. I also question whether it matters -- is what seems so familiar to me ('The Mall's a paradise of buskers', 'twenty-two kilometres of roadkill', 'That bushranger who lurked behind a rock') also part of every other Australian country town? Sharkey has the rare ability to reach into our national psyche and pull out the ugly centre yet not rail at the horror of it all. Rather, he pities what he finds, and can still find time to make a joke as in the final two stanzas of 'The custom of Cockaigne':

> No use talking.
> Council reckon water's all right.
>
> Like to see them put it in their whisky. (49)

Lines such as these make this book a pleasure to read and re-read. Sharkey's ability to grab a reader's attention is unfailing. He can move

from the majestic to the mundane in a line, and he is never better than when he allows us to glimpse something of his own life. A poem such as 'Women in their houses on their own', with its gentle put down of Eliot's attitude to women, is just one example:

> I doubt that conversation would change much for them or me.
> Some of us have worked on our routines. Eliot, I think,
>
> did not know that. While he was slinging off at office girls
> who went to bed and ate alone, I think many or most of them,
>
> if they had known what he thought of them
> would have said that they preferred to eat alone. (61)

Any of the poems in this book could be used as material to support the teaching of writing poetry. Sharkey's craftsmanship is masterful and a model for any budding poet. Let such creature marvel at the construction of 'Where the bunyip builds its nest: Five centos'. In this poem, each line is borrowed from other poems, with a key to these poems following. For example, a line from Fay Zwicky follows a line from Robert Adamson. In its entirety, the poem is a mighty work able to stand alone, further demonstration of Sharkey in full command of his poetic powers. But to use the book as a teaching tool, while worthwhile, would lessen its primary purpose, to be read for pleasure. Pleasure it provides in bucket loads. This is a book for those who love words and good writing.

The quality of the production of this book is a credit to the publisher. The poems are beautifully laid out and printed on solid stock. There are endpapers, elegantly black, and the matt cover features a neat image adapted from a screen print by Andrew Bogle.

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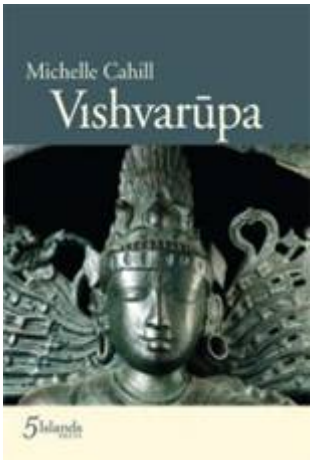
TEXT review

Poetry that draws on vectors of experience and movement

review by Tina Giannoukos



Michele Cahill
Vishvarūpa
Five Islands Press, Melbourne 2011
ISBN 9780734042057
Pb 94pp AUSD22.95

Michelle Cahill's collection of poetry, *Vishvarūpa*, crosses spatio-temporal and subjective borders to become a lyrical meditation on being. In its rich imagery, textured musicality and experiential multiplicity, the collection draws to itself and releases its richness. Throughout it offers a plethora of sensations and perceptions, all refracted through meditations on Hindu gods and other realities, the erotic as liminal experience and place as imaginal as much as real landscape.

A metaphor for the collection's profusion of images, its variety of moods and its linguistic suppleness is the utterance in 'Kissing Hamlet' that 'Words come / to me as freely as a sparrow falls, unfastened by the sky' (66). In its crossing of spatio-cultural boundaries, or its interrogation of the speaker's self moving between and across India, Australia and other locations, it challenges the notion of the local as repository of poetic signification. As the speaker says in 'Lung-Ta':

> If I drift towards the space between now
> and my own Shangri-La, the shadows
> have names. They speak another language. (27)

It is not that *Vishvarūpa* opens the local to the translocal (Ramazani 165), which it assuredly does, but that it is translocal in its beginnings. The translocal becomes the liminal space of its exploration: its natural ground not as essence but as difference. In 'Somewhere, a River', we sense the speaker's desire to remain suspended between states: 'For now, I am

frozen, somewhere between aquatic / and terrestrial' (85). The liminal is the ground of the speaker's experience.

To claim the translocal rather than the local for *Vishvarūpa* is not to entrap *Vishvarūpa* in an alternative canon of diasporic or migrant poetry (though that is not a negative) but to note that Cahill's poetic imaginary traverses multiple locales of being. Less about locale and more about being, *Vishvarūpa* is the unencumbered imagination at work. It explores the way the self splits into the myriad possibilities of its spatio-cultural connections and disconnections. *Vishvarūpa* invites us to engage with possibility as incarnate consciousness in the body of the speaker.

The speaker may move in a liminal space of otherworldliness, but it is precisely this that yields a productive interrogation of being as multiple. In the worked tension of her lines, Cahill makes the most of the notion of Vishvarūpa, the divine revelation by Krishna to Aravanan in the Indian epic *Bhagavad Gita*, as 'manifold, having all forms and colours'. She celebrates the imagistic and musical potentialities of language without eliding language's limitation as a vehicle for experience. The sensual also assumes its place:

> Why do I steal my fingers through the grass
> whose rumours are haptic? They whisper
> the wind's breath, the earth's furtive song. (47)

> The rational sensuality of Cahill's language, its worked materiality, and her startling metaphors, their imagistic intensity, make for a poetry that draws on vectors of experience and movement. Hers is a Blakean coming together of reality and imagination. It makes of *Vishvarūpa* an intoxicating poetry of observation, perception and heightened experience. As in 'Deva Loka', 'Each bend in the road is a new discovery, an act of faith' (22).

To separate the poems into their assumed categories of geography and experience is to overlook how the poems in *Vishvarūpa* open to one another. The speaker's untranslated words, scattered like pebbles of otherworldliness as much as the condition of the multi-lingual, perform their silent displacements and reinscriptions. This is a poetics of the conjectural:

> Nasreen serves chai and sweet rice. He is tipsy.
> We talk in a nervous patois of English-Hindi,
> in a voice that retreats from its subject before
>
> it can ever be defined. I begin my endless
> revisions, to modify clauses, edit adjectives
> until my hands are too numb to type. I smoke. (26)

India, in all its multiform manifestation, troubles the poetic sensibility of the speaker who is estranged yet imbued in its sensual essence. In 'City of Another Home' the speaker is 'half-aware that it's ineffable to love a city that was never / really my home, or a home whose walls are flaky as paratha' (38), while in 'Ode to Mumbai' the speaker is reflexively aware that 'Mumbai, even your name / is a philologer's conundrum, as mine is the antithesis / of my self, a colonial slip' (23).

Yet even though the city has a history in which the speaker's is missing, language potentially reinscribes her, not as a sure thing, but as ecstatic

flight: ‘Your poem has a history, in which my pages are missing. / I rise from the poem on a burning ladder of language’ (23). To be foreign yet not foreign is to be like Hanuman, the monkey god, whose ‘shadow / slips between temples, an alter-ego moving between two worlds’ (41).

The multiple points of the speaker’s locations, like ‘Mumbai, London, Goa’ (35) in the poem ‘Childhood’, remind us how much these poems, whether they speak of India or Australia or some other place, are a proliferating reiteration of different realities and experiences, sensual and emotional. The speaker’s identity is not necessarily defined as Indian or Australian. This lack of definition is an instance of the rich yield of an imagination that traverses fields of being. In ‘Ode to Mumbai’ above, the speaker argues that:

> I
> hang in a gap between the sound and meaning of words,
> dipping my subconscious in different time zones, where
>
> my bed is a temple and a brothel, where dream defines me.
> (23)

This suggests that it is in the spectral zone of the dream that the speaker’s consciousness takes form. The imagination becomes the liminal landscape of the speaker’s multiple reality rather than any one place. While the speaker walks her daughter to the classroom in ‘Rainy Days’, she receives ‘passing smiles from other mums: Chinese, / Pakastani, Sikh’ (50). This is place as slippage, the site of difference, not essentialised location, that opens the self to the Other. Driving home in ‘Pastiche’, the speaker tries ‘to imagine a world without diversity’ (54), noting a little later how:

> The parallax drift of roadworks, pylons,
>
> jacaranda blooms are a montage, so familiar
> that I feel carelessly numb, reading an sms
> at the traffic lights, then texting back. (54)

The speaker’s consciousness moves easily from one mode to another, from one place to another, now India, now Australia, drawing extraordinary images and sounding a diverse music. A poem like ‘Parvati in Darlinghurst’ draws together the various forces of *Vishvarūpa*. Not only is it a witty rewriting of erotic desire, the speaker draws attention to her difference, as she ironises her performance of the ancient erotic rites:

> We scorned the *Puranas*, our tryst no Himalayan
> cave, but a hotel bed I had draped with stockings,
> lingerie, and the crystal ice of a Third Eye. I admit
> that’s why I spoke with the speed of an antelope. (57)

If there is an image in which to cast the speaker, then one is temptingly offered in ‘Durga: a Self Portrait’: ‘What I see is myself in this world: deviant, without genealogy’ (59). The poem, ‘The Stinking Mantra’, carries its reflective questionings on the death of a possum with the lightness of the speaker’s dark musings on India. As the possum’s body decomposes, the speaker hears in her sleep ‘the quiet vowels, rising from / wisteria, from the hot ground, and falling back into silence’ (46). In ‘Pastiche’, the Otherness of the speaker’s self is juxtaposed to the Otherness of art itself:

> I lie inertly on the grass, while another
> foreigner, the Henry Moore statue,
> inspires a different spatial boundary. (54)

The linguistic fluidity of *Vishvarūpa* bears productively upon poetry as an art form. The sensuality of the text's language performs a double movement. It releases the lyric's political edge as much as folds it back into the individual poems. Cahill puts under pressure the notion of the lyric as retreat from the world, implicating the speaker's lyric persona at the juncture between connection and disconnection. She reclaims the lyric moment, not as confession, but as interrogation. This ethics of interrogation as lyrical outpouring makes *Vishvarūpa* a powerful interrogation of the erotics of difference in all its manifestations. The lyric emerges as much ethical as experiential in concern. As the speaker asserts In '(In)Visible':

> There are those who admire the geometry,
> these metaphors of space.
> Be elevated, they advise. Take in the air,
> the uncommon with the requisite.
> What is ethics? Not smugness
> or complacency. Not prescription.
> Nothing which is not political. (37)

Sound is never strained in *Vishvarūpa*. In the slippage of the text's language, its seductive enunciation of difference, and the otherworldliness of its images, their imaginative scope, dislocation assumes its performative face. In opening the collection with 'Something Like a Reverie', Cahill signals *Vishvarūpa*'s elusiveness: its imaginal leaps. Throughout the collection, the poems perform their dislocations not through a fragmented poetic but through the contrasting sensual richness of the speaker's observations. The poems celebrate the imagistic potentialities of language but do not elide language's limitations as a vehicle for experience. As the speaker says in '(In)Visible' above:

> There are discourses of the spectral,
> the numinous in which, it seems,
> I exist in parentheses.
> Tears and sweat accessorised.
> My body, sensual, without culture
> bears no initial.
> My home,
> colonised by language.
> (Yours). (37)

Cahill is a sensual poet whose sharp poetic intelligence underscores her rich evocation of difference. In *Vishvarūpa* she invites us to engage with poetry, not as a closed field of experience, but as open to multiple imaginaries and states of being.

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return to text

Tina Giannoukos is a poet, fiction writer and reviewer. Her first collection of poetry is In a Bigger City *(Five Islands Press, 2005). Her poetry is anthologised in* Southern Sun, Aegean Light: Poetry of Second-Generation Greek Australians *(Arcadia, 2011). Her most recent publication is the sonnet sequence in* Border-Crossings: Narrative and Demarcation in Postcolonial Literatures and Media *(Winter, 2012). A recipient of a Varuna Writers Fellowship, Giannoukos has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne and has read her poetry in Greece and China.*

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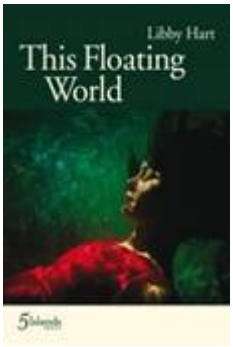
TEXT review

A luminous cartography: Libby Hart's floating landscapes

review by Jo Langdon



Libby Hart
This Floating World
Five Islands Press, Melbourne 2011
ISBN 9780734041999
Pb 77pp AUD21.95

Libby Hart's *This Floating World* was published by Five Islands Press in 2011, and, reading it then, my early impression of this collection was that these are simply beautiful poems, which is also to say that the apparent simplicity of this book is one of its major strengths. Hart's verse is delicate and pared back, demonstrating a lyricism that exercises restraint. There is also a familiarity to the language and the imagery, which is not to imply unoriginality; rather, Hart interrogates and revises images and likenesses often taken for granted; over- or misused.

Revisiting these poems, I'm reminded of the intimacy of Hart's work, which is at the same time outward looking rather than conceited or confessional. An overture of four poems is followed by a sequence or 'songline', which takes the reader on a tour of Ireland, with a focus on its inhabitants and elements. Reading *This Floating World*, I'm also struck by how fitting it is that Hart has guest-edited the recent INTERLOCUTOR issue of *Cordite Poetry Review* (November, 2012). Hart's collection resonates with a plurality of voices. There are human and ghostly presences, many of them longing and lonely, alongside animals and personifications of the landscape, most frequently the wind, rain, and ocean waves.

Numerous poems begin with a conjunction such as 'and', as if picking up a previous conversation where it left off, as in 'How like', a poem from the book's first section, which begins: 'And I'm wondering about your face, / how it alters when a mood takes hold' (17). Later poems from the songline are in direct dialogue with one another, such as 'Widower sitting on the edge of his bed – *Kinsale*', which is followed by a poem called 'His wife, as ghost'.

The titles of some poems could almost double as script directions: 'His wife, in a low voice', 'Husband to his wife – *Westport*', and 'Daylight, speaking to the wind', to name just a few. It's not surprising, then, to learn that prior to its book-length publication, *This Floating World* was dramatised by Teresa Bell and Gavin Blatchford in 2010. The collection's numerous voices speak to the openness of this work, and its adaptability; how beautifully the sequence might lend itself to such collaboration, and to multiple and various audiences through these different mediums.

Along with the feeling that these poems are staged in a theatrical sense, there is a musicality at play here as well which is most explicit in the poem 'A man singing softly to himself in the rain – *Cavan*', which reads like a song lyric, particularly where it repeats, in full, the poem's second stanza at the end, much like a refrain. Indeed, playful repetitions skip all the way through Hart's collection, layering, altering or amending the imagery, scenes and conversations as they unfold. In the opening poem from the book's four-poem overture, 'If I were to build a heart', there is 'steam and all things steamy' (15); in the poem 'Wave upon wave – *off the coast of Donegal*', we read that there is 'rain and rain, and rain approaching' (25).

These repetitions provide the collection as a whole with both fluidity and cohesion; images loop back and forth, and Hart maps a space that is both intimate and at times fleeting, constructed and voiced by its cast of uncertain inhabitants. Whether the speaker in 'Woman having a bath – *Coleraine*' might later be 'The other woman', for instance, or the voice of another poem, isn't always clear; nevertheless the openness of meaning distinguishes it from the likes of a more narrative-driven verse novel.

There are ephemeral and uncertain stories layered throughout this collection, yet each poem works individually, as evidenced by the inclusion of a number of them in Felicity Plunkett's *Thirty Australian Poets* anthology (Plunkett 2011), and their publication in journals and magazines – both in Australia and overseas – prior to the release of *This Floating World*. This openness extends to most of Hart's endings; final lines which are not 'punch lines', nor which contrive some kind of resolution or epiphany. That these images and voices are seen and heard is, in a way, more important than what they might have to say or reveal to us – if anything.

As suggested at the beginning of this review, Hart's work also demonstrates an interest in the way language operates – the way writing often looks to or relies upon one image or meaning in order to forge or convey another. Hart's poetry often questions such likenesses, how one image or meaning might rely upon another, and at times unnecessarily or misleadingly so. In the poem 'How like', for instance, a series of striking yet sparse similes – 'Such a changeling / like a sparrow, like a burning flutter,' – are defamiliarised by: 'How like a stretched metaphor you are'; 'How like etcetera in the tall, green grasses'; and 'How like a slipperiness of truth slithering by and by' (17).

Hart's metaphors echo and repeat, but rarely feel stretched or confused, as in the poem 'Lover – *Donegal*', which begins:

> And just after you come
> you hold my hands and we turn into tangles,
> limbs like ribbons. (35)

This imagery is continued through to the poem's end, with words such as 'tie', 'knot', 'laced', 'threaded', 'looped' and 'float' signalling the lovers' intimacy. There is consistency, without predictability.

It's also worth noting how seamlessly the book's production complements Hart's poetry. Indeed, Five Islands Press are continuing to publish aesthetically pleasing collections, with Claire Potter's *Swallow*, Michelle Cahill's *Vishvarūpa* and Lisa Jacobson's *The Sunlit Zone* among other beautifully produced titles of the last few years. In *This Floating World*, the stunning cover image by photo artist Samantha Everton is imbued with a strange sensation of floating weightlessly whilst at the same time submerged, saturated. Everton's image might recall any number of Hart's voices, although perhaps most notably – to this reviewer at least – it evokes the speaker in 'The ghost of Bridget Murphy – *Ceann Sléibhe*', a poem worth citing in full:

> Such darkness nets a memory
>
> of how my father once
> threw me into the sea.
>
> Just an infant, I sank like a pebble
> and lived inside a liquid room.
>
> Its ceiling was the swell of wave
> and even though he changed his mind
>
> I fear I became too full of tide
> and much too storm-wild.
>
> I had nothing to hold on to. (58)

To conclude, Hart's book constructs a transient and ghost-permeated map of place and space. It is a text that poses interesting questions regarding our imagining and representation of landscape and those who inhabit it.

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Jo Langdon is the author of a chapbook of poems, Snowline *(Whitmore Press, 2012). She currently lives in Geelong where she is undertaking postgraduate studies at Deakin University.*

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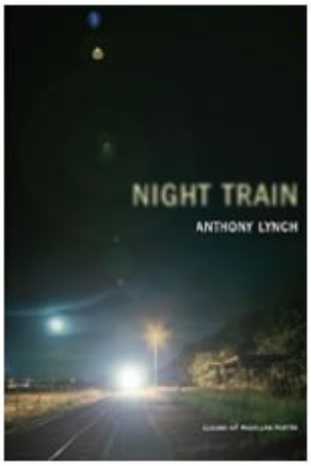
TEXT review

Working on the night moves

review by Jay Daniel Thompson



Anthony Lynch
Night Train
Clouds of Magellan, Melbourne 2011
ISBN: 9780980712087
Pb 67pp AUD20.00

Night Train is the most recent book for Anthony Lynch. Lynch is a reviewer, an author and an editor at Deakin University Press. This volume is a verse collection, and it does depict a rail trip undertaken during the evening. Lynch's book also depicts other settings (many of them in rural Victoria) in its compact 67 pages.

To the extent that this collection has an overarching theme, it would be the sheer power and aesthetic presence of the natural world. To this end, Night Train has something in common with Robyn Rowland's Seasons of Doubt and Burning (2010). However, whereas Rowland's collection had a distinctly political edge, this is not the case with Lynch's book. Lynch is more interested in constructing different moods and aesthetics, in making ordinary places seem extraordinary.

Sometimes, the natural world is described in a quirky fashion. One of Lynch's poems opens thus: 'Face north where the You Yangs/rise like humps on a Photoshop loch' (16). Another entry contains the following: 'The light is thin/the air smoggy/with confessions' (11). In the latter example, a linguistic act ('confessing') becomes metaphorically intertwined with a force of nature ('air').

Elsewhere, *Night Train* contains gothic hues. An example is 'Blood Plums', which is also the collection's strongest entry.

> We collect mail, and the years pass
> Dark plums swamp the neighbour's tree

> Vampires in the shed she has no key for
> Then the starlings, the driveway paved with bloodied
> stones. (35)

The seemingly unremarkable sight of plum stones on the ground becomes deeply unsettling. The humble garden shed takes on an eerie significance. The poem as a whole suggests the violence and dread that lurk behind images of suburban comfort and safety.

Lynch strikes a similarly grim chord in the poem 'Ash Wednesday'. The title evokes memories of the bushfires that raged in Victoria and South Australia circa 1983. So, too, do the references to 'rainless clouds', 'ashen faces' and a 'red and purple sky' (54). The use of colours in 'Ash Wednesday' is, as the quotes suggest, evocative. The poem's theme extends beyond its imagery, though, and can be read as a commentary on the physical and psychic devastation caused by bushfires generally.

Not all of *Night Train* is bleak. The title poem aptly evokes the experience of travelling through outer suburbia – or, in Lynch's words, 'the outer rings of suburban Saturn' – after dark (12). Lynch describes passing 'freeway lights' and 'the depopulated moons of stations' (12). This poem has an intense, dreamlike beauty. 'Night Train' is followed by a poem entitled 'Continental', which begins:

> Window shutters fold night away,
> a woman walks her dachshund
> on the sunny side of the street
> and somewhere a church bell. (13)

The juxtaposition of these two poems is astute, and heightens the sense of travelling from night to day, as well as through that grey space between sleep and waking life. Lynch also suggests a change in weather: 'Outside the sun distils last night's wetness' (13). This trip has a slightly uncanny feel about it. The protagonist is staying in a hotel, from where he makes the observation, that 'even car horns/sound different' (13). In 'Night Train', he concedes that this place (Geelong) is, in fact, the place where he grew up.

Lynch's writing style is wonderfully sparse. There is not a superfluous word or a shred of overstatement, yet it conveys a lyrical perspective on the beauty and horror of nature. I eagerly await the opportunity to hear Lynch read his poetry in a public forum, and see how this compares with the experience of encountering his poems on a page.

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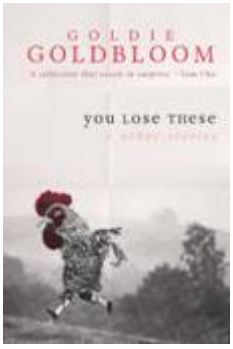
TEXT review

On the road to excellence

review by Victoria Reeve



Goldie Goldbloom
You Lose These + Other Stories
Freemantle Press, Perth 2011
ISBN 9781921696879
Pb 237pp AUD27.95

Goldie Goldbloom's *You Lose These + Other Stories* is a collection of eighteen thematically linked short narratives. What unites them is difficult to describe; there is a clear sense of wonder and engagement with the strange and confronting aspects of life. Trauma is always relevant to these stories; sometimes the trauma is clearly defined; rarely, if ever, does it take centre stage. Rather, the focus is on the individual protagonists and the impact that restrictive social forces, denials, acts and threats of violence, and other forms of oppression have on their emotional lives. The collection might be said to explore the paradox of how it is possible to lose your way on the way to becoming who you are. These are individuals whose experiences have made them feel adrift and lacking in agency in some aspect of their lives. Elements of fantasy, absurd and unnatural phenomena, quaint depictions of everyday activities, strange acts of heroism, and immodest self-deprecation, provide levity to what might otherwise be harrowing tales. This levity bubbles up at times in joyous overtones that can be infectious. Sometimes the tone is just right; at other times it sounds forced, but every story has its charms and remains memorable long after reading.

The stories each have protagonists who are driven by motivations that do not conform to their social world. A strong sense of interiority (both in psychological and spatial terms) pervades as the closeness of community reveals itself to be a palpable and restraining force. Often these hardships are clear enough – the intolerance of non-normative sexual and social positions that cast the roles of wife, mother, and even child, in stifling terms – but there are equally nebulous constrictions of personality and the fear of choice, exerting their pressure on the protagonists.

One strong theme linking the majority of narratives in this collection is Judaism. This is interesting, given that these Jewish narratives are positioned within a wider thematic structure by the first story, 'On the Road to Katherine' and the last story, 'If You Cut Off Her Head, a Horse Falls Out', which references the Persian tale, *One Thousand and One Nights.* A tantalising link exists between these two stories. The main characters, Care, the child of the first story, and Madison, the adult in the last story, share sufficient similarities as to suggest they are related, perhaps mother and child. Both stories deal with violent childhoods and the terrorising of women by tyrannical men. Presenting the narratives in this way, sandwiched between two stories with disquieting connections, is provocative. The analogy with *One Thousand and One Nights* further informs the collection's context: the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* are themselves framed by the narrative of their narrator, Scheherazade, fighting for her life and for the lives of other girls and young women who would also be beheaded were she to fail in her quest. But rarely, if ever, have Scheherazade's efforts been so clearly positioned as a noble quest.

Ultimately, Scheherazade's story is about violence and oppression and the wits needed to avert the death that awaits her. But whereas *One Thousand and One Nights* privileges the adventures of men overcoming adversity, Goldbloom's stories stay with Scheherazade's plight. 'If you cut her Head off, a horse falls out' evokes the enchanting adventures (of magical horses and the like) told by a woman living under the threat of decapitation. Goldbloom's stories are equally beguiling, but don't distract the reader from the tyrannical forces that motivate their narration. These are stories of women coming to terms with restrictive social codes imposed by religious fanaticism and entrenched cultural practice; of social patterns that permit abusive situations: ultimately, these are stories that explore the effect of tyrannical authority in its many forms.

Goldbloom's versatility as a writer is apparent throughout the collection as she adopts different narrative voices, styles and structures by which to recount stories that, for the most part, are so fascinating and engrossing, the suspension of disbelief becomes immediate. I found the strong use of vernacular Australian speech in the opening story, 'The Road to Katherine,' initially grating because it seemed too pronounced for an opening narrative, but it bothered me less when I reread the story. Structural elements in 'You Lose These: A Queer Ulysses', along with the story's subtitle, make clear its connection with Joyce. I felt the story to be at its finest and most impressive when it achieved independence from the novel it parodies. 'This is What I Want; This is What I Don't Want' is beautiful and disturbing, but flawed in its assumption that, on the street, girls are more vulnerable to predators than boys. 'The Decline and Fall of Drusilla Ann Gherkin', a story of cruelty, is at times over-wrought and lacks subtlety, making the reader feel, not sympathy, but disbelief, even though the suffering is entirely believable. Likewise, I found 'I Have Tasted Muskrat' heavy-handed and literal. It failed to achieve what I presume to be its goal in light of Goldbloom's otherwise artfully affecting stories. The strangeness dwindled and became claustrophobic because it mocked its protagonists unsympathetically.

In terms of the collection's many strengths, 'Tandem Ride' possesses a gentle authenticity conducive to a fully immersive reading experience. It narrates the experience of an adolescent girl being groomed for exploitation. There is something profoundly affecting in this story. The impact on adult life of an adolescent longing for filial love is persuasively

drawn. ‘What She Saw in the Crystal Ball’ is an elegant, beautiful, if painful, story of late-life pregnancy and its accompanying fears, joys, and hopes of loss; and ‘Raw Milk’ is an interesting story about the boundaries of sophistication and difference existing between rural and city life. ‘C.H.A.R.M.I.N.G’ is probably the most beguiling of the stories in the collection; thoroughly engaging, touching and eloquent. ‘Undesirable’ is a fascinating story that works, like the others, because it provides recognisable forms of suffering and human emotion in circumstances that lend an aura of otherness.

Overall, I found *You Lose These* to be an entrancing read. As a work of literature, it utilises a diverse range of formal strategies to defamiliarise the everyday – genre, voice, narrative structure and point of view are all deftly manipulated to create the qualities that make it so interesting and enjoyable. Every story must be read to its conclusion. These are compelling narratives. Highly recommended.

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TEXT review

A parcel of rogues in search of a theme

review by Sandra Burr

David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon (guest eds)
Southerly: A Nest of Bunyips
Volume 71, Number 3
Brandl Schlesinger, Sydney 2011
ISBN 9781921556296
Pb 264pp AUD26.95

In his editorial, David Brooks says that this edition of *Southerly* contains a backlog of submissions "too good to reject but refusing an easy categorisation" (6) for inclusion in previous, themed issues. A poem by Michael Sharkey, 'Where the Bunyip Builds its Nest', prompted Brooks to pull together this collection of poems and literary criticism by or about poets, and which seemed to fit the profile of bunyips, those 'strange hybrids whose shrill quarrellings can sometimes be heard late at night' (7). It is a considerable collection of poems, essays, stories and reviews indeed; the edition is not only longer than usual, it has overflowed into *The Long Paddock*, *Southerly*'s online sister site. The relationship between the writing in this collection is nebulous as the content of a bunyip's nest; difficult to appraise.

Sharkey's inspirational poem is a delightful conceit – a bricolage of 200 lines of poetry taken from the work of other poets that traces and celebrates 200 years of Australian poetry. Sharkey's introduction, or gloss, provides a very interesting and illuminating explanation of the poem, which, while dealing with a serious subject, is clearly written with a sense of fun. The poem is made up of five centos (poems made up of other poet's lines) and of necessity, includes pages of endnotes for the forensically inclined. It really is a masterful work and we should be indebted to David Brooks for its publication.

Many fine poems are inspired by nature, the bush, animals, plants, and birds: works by Thomas Shapcott, Kate Middleton, Andrew Burke, Tom

Overdale, John Kinsella (the 'Jam Tree Gully Poems'), Julia Maclean, and Graham Kershaw. I was particularly entranced by Burke's description of 'lace faced fungus' and '... snails/that deckle our mail' ('The Name of the Game', 149).

Other poems exemplify the diversity of the collection: from the whimsical 'Surplus'by DJ Huppatz, and Jennifer Maiden's equally wonderful 'The Pearl Roundabout' which invokes Hilary Clinton and Eleanor Roosevelt, to the reflective mourning for lost things by Peter Kirkpatrick in 'The Angels of the House'. There are funny poems like the self-deprecatory 'Poetry and Violins' by Michael Crane, and deeply unsettling poems such as the brutal images of slaughter in Dimitra Hervey's 'Sport', which brought me to tears. Sarah Jane Barnett's 'Marathon Man' is a gem; a beautifully constructed piece moving through traditional stanzas to prose poetry and looping back to a paragraph structure in a compelling narrative about a prosthetic leg.

There are four short stories, the best being Matthia Dempsey's evocative contemplation of love and loss, 'One Week Gone', and Greg Bogaert's tale of an ageing, disabled Parisian market porter who, through unusual circumstances, experiences a profound change of luck ('Market Porter'). The story is accompanied by a delightful photograph of a market porter taken in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.

The subject matter of the essays is as wide ranging as the poetry. Kevin Hart's in depth discussion of the story of Susannah and the elders in 'Susannah without the Cherub' focusses on her ambiguous nature as 'both butterfly and cherub, beautiful and chaste' (77). He critiques AD Hope's view of Susannah as presented in his poem, 'The Double Looking Glass',and concludes that 'we are left with a dream that became a vision and that will be smashed, at least temporarily, by a brutal reality' (95). Kevin Hart is himself the subject of an essay in this edition: Lachlan Brown's 'The Edges and Voices of Silence in Kevin Hart's Wicked Heat'.

Two essays explore poetry in the media. John Jenkins' essay, 'Poetry as Cinema', traces the influence of poems in the pantheon of Australian movies and documentaries. They are surprisingly numerous and range from a number of ballads by Adam Lindsay Gordon; Henry Lawson's 'The Man from Snowy River'; and CJ Dennis' The Sentimental Bloke', to the contemporary verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask*; the character of Tom, an aspiring poet, in Luke Davies' *Candy*; and the oral stories come poetry which is the basis for *Ten Canoes*. Jenkins concludes: 'The historical influence of poetry on Australian cinema is unmistakeable, and strongly reciprocal, with filmic techniques also employed in a great many Australian poems, in their disposition of imagery, their structure, formal strategies and very grain' (148). Mike Ladd's 'Notes Towards a Radio Poetics' explores the morphology of sounds. He discusses their physicality by revisiting his own experiences of reading poetry on radio and finds himself agreeing with Zvonimir Bajsic's tenet that 'radio is a humble trade, a work of the hands, and of the ear, as much as of the intellect' (169).

This edition also contains several reviews: Craig Powell on the *Collected Poems* of Francis Webb; Michelle Cahill on Elizabeth Campbell's second collection, *Error*; and Andrew Carruthers review of Geoff Page's *A Sudden Sentence in the Air: Jazz Poems*. Cahill describes Campbell as 'an uncompromising poet who is able to meet her own challenges' (244) and

Carruthers concludes that reading Page is as good, if not better than listening to music.

In reviewing a collection of this size it is inevitable that many pieces are left out. This is not a reflection of their worth or their quality. Indeed the high standard of nearly all the contributions points to a collection that, while strangely hybrid, is compelling and fascinating.

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