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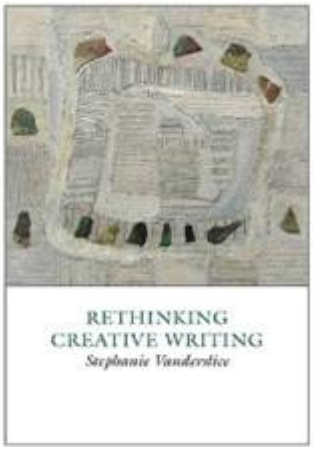
Reviews contents

TEXT review

Professing Creative Writing with a slice of passion

review by Kevin Brophy



Stephanie M Vanderslice
Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education: Programs and Practices that Work
Creative Writing Studies imprint of Professional and Higher Partnerships Ltd, Cambridgeshire, UK 2011
ISBN 9781907076312
Pb 143pp AUD18.56 (Amazon price)

This book is the first in a proposed international series. The next will be *Researching Creative Writing* by Jen Webb, with two more planned after that. The titles are aimed at scholars, students and teachers in higher education settings. If this first book is an indication of the purpose of the series, then they will be books that insert themselves in the contemporary debates, the contemporary developments and the 'practical' problems faced by the burgeoning presence of creative writing programs and creative writers in higher education.

Vanderslice's book is sharply intelligent, and for its purposes deeply researched, but it is not a book that draws upon philosophy, aesthetic theory, critical theory, cultural theory, post-modern thinking or deconstructive argument. It is a polemical pamphlet produced by a practitioner of long experience who senses crisis in a discipline that, at least in the USA, seems to her to be shambling along too amiably and too smugly.

This is a practical book, one that urges all creative writing programs to be more transparent about their philosophy of teaching, to focus responsibly on learning outcomes that give students a chance to find creative lives somewhere in the arts, in word-based professions or in publishing industry, and finally to be more critical of the workshop as a central teaching technique.

Stephanie Vanderslice is an associate professor at the University of Central Arkansas, an MFA graduate from George Mason University, with a PhD on the male-female Bildungsroman from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. A passionate teacher, much of her writing has been on the teaching of creative writing, so this book is for her the outcome of fifteen years as an academic in the field of creative writing. She is well aware of the social, gender and class problems associated with higher education and with creative writing in particular, where the stars are often men and the students are often women, where creative writing workshops can engender conservative and outmoded ideas too often.

Such an analysis, however, is not at the core of her book. She notes at the beginning that creative writing programs have burgeoned in the UK, in Australia and particularly in the USA as cash cows but with hastily constructed programs. In the American context, the ubiquitous workshop can mean that many creative writing subjects and programs develop without curriculum, without set reading, with no development of research skills, with no craft instruction and with unpredictable styles of teaching. None of this is designed to help students 'sustain writing lives after they graduate' (6). These programs do not seem to be interested in the fact that they are sending students into a world of online content, new media writing, e-books, a transforming publishing industry, games writing and screen writing of many kinds. Why are creative writing programs not explicitly preparing students for these challenges of the present and the future?

Vanderslice urges the importance of outcomes-based education that focuses upon transferable skill development for students. Of course not all undergraduates, or even postgraduate students, studying creative writing will pursue a writing career, but most of them do want, she claims, to pursue 'meaningful careers in the creative industries' (13). Their courses should, she argues, provide them with a plan that not only teaches them 'to write but also how to make creative lives' (28). Linking creative writing programs with practising writers, literary agents and publishers in real-life ways can introduce a professional and accountable element to programs. It is important, she concludes, that creative writing in higher education serves two masters (professional and creative) for the sake of a healthy literary culture.

The 'community' that workshopping provides is no longer enough, Vanderslice writes. What then are the fundamental problems with workshops? Several times, she makes the point that workshops were introduced at Iowa for the benefit of already polished and experienced, mature students in the 1940s. They are ideal for testing and further developing such writers, but young undergraduate students flounder in such environments. Undergraduate students need to be instructed in the use of the tools of the writer, the basics of their craft, before being thrown into the rough and tumble of the workshop. A further problem she identifies is the insular and solipsistic nature of the workshop. Do students aim to write to please their teacher, to satisfy other students, or do they aim to invoke a wider, more public audience? Vanderslice advocates a more 'taught' form of the workshop in undergraduate courses. She adopts Priscila Uppal and Wendy Bishop's suggestion that guided writing exercises across all genres (including poetry) might be more instructive and more important to the development of early creativity than workshops. In her own courses, she only marks students on the quality of their written responses to the work of other students, and the quality of their critical introductions to their own creative work. She does not mark the creative

writing but does respond to it in detail (34-35). This is a brave, and I think creative, way of teaching creative writing, a method I have tried recently and wish to explore further with undergraduate students.

This book is replete with references to those who have written on creative writing pedagogy, especially Americans, and it contains a useful bibliographic chapter tracing the major works of history, analysis and commentary on creative writing in the academy. Finally, it contains an honour roll of those programs in the UK and USA that show some of the qualities Vanderslice admires. There are descriptions of the best of these programs. Vanderslice's style of writing here is direct, lively, personal and energetic. Hers is without doubt the voice of a passionate teacher. Her recommendations for the rejuvenation and transformation of creative writing programs might seem to Australian readers slightly odd, for my impression from more than ten years of attending AAWP (Australasian Association of Writing Programs) conferences, marking dozens of PhD manuscripts, and being immersed in the development of creative writing at the University of Melbourne is that in Australia the importance of curriculum, of outcome-based education, of professional opportunities and the acquisition of transferable skills for students have become central imperatives in many of our programs. One reason for this perhaps is that we do not have an equivalent of the MFA, and our programs generally are staffed by academics who are writers and researchers but are equally focused upon careers as teachers. Nevertheless, this is an excellent resource for ideas, for inspiration, and for sources on aspects of pedagogy for creative writing programs.

Professor Kevin Brophy teaches in the creative writing program in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He has had four books of poetry and four works of fiction published, and three books on creativity and the teaching of creative writing. In 2009 he won the Calibre Prize for an outstanding essay, and recently his poetry has been included in Australian Verse since 1788 *and the* Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature *and* Best Australian Poems 2011.

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TEXT review

A useful addition to resources for teaching writing

review by Jeremy Fisher

Andrew Cowan
The Art of Writing Fiction
Longman, Harlow, UK 2011
ISBN 9781408248348
Pb 240pp GPB16.99

Andrew Cowan is the Director of the MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, and in that capacity he delivered the keynote address to the 2010 Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference, 'Blind Spots: What Creative Writing Doesn't Know'. The writing program at the University of East Anglia is the longest standing in the UK. Cowan states in his introduction that his book was written with the undergraduate syllabus there in mind, and that the chapters resemble his lessons. However, *The Art of Writing Fiction* does not read as if it was written to fit into a writing program. It seems better suited to a residential workshop, particularly with regard to the many activities featured in the book, though Cowan says these are the same as he uses in his teaching and are arranged in a similar sequence.

Perhaps the workshop tone of the book is influenced by the fact that Cowan has based much of his extended commentary in the book on individual or group conversations with his Masters' students. From the many informative digressions shedding light on the work of other writers, as well as on Cowan's own writing practice, it is also apparent that the book is 'informed by an awareness of literary theory and the literary canon' (2). As a 'how to' writing guide, it differs from so many by highlighting the importance of reading. For Cowan, 'writing is the out-breath, the exhalation', while reading is 'the in breath, the inspiration' (2), a view that I would endorse for all writing programs.

The book starts with an examination of writers' routines, encouraging readers to think of how they organise their day to write, and to also

consider the problems they face when they try to write. There are a number of interesting exercises in the first chapter that I used with some of my undergraduate students in a short fiction course. These provoked a great deal of discussion and assisted in breaking the ice.

Cowan encourages the use of observational journals, so his next chapter offers guidelines for doing that. He draws a distinction between a journal, where observations are recorded, and a scrapbook, in which pictures and text and found objects are pasted, but in practice such recording devices may be merged. I'm unsure whether or not they are useful for all writers all the time – as a writer, I don't regularly use either myself any more – but for beginning writers they may well be useful tools.

Cowan's third chapter examines automatic writing. The aim of the exercises here is to free the writer from the restraints of contemplation and consideration. He immerses his students in writing practice, encouraging output. His text is accompanied with a steady rhythm of footnotes that allow him to, at different times, contradict, elaborate on or provide some other insight into his main text. I'm not usually a fan of footnotes being used in this manner, often finding them a distraction, but this is not the case with this book. I often found myself reading the footnotes as a sub-text or an alternative narrative.

As the book progresses, Cowan introduces writing techniques, as well as writing about place and character. I found the chapter on voices a bit too brief. Cowan attempts to cover here both authorial voice and how conversation is used in fiction. He adds a further dimension – vernacular voices. To my mind, if all of these are meant to be covered in just one week of a semester, as Cowan suggests in his introduction, none will be well understood by students. I found this one of the less satisfying chapters.

The following chapter on point of view, though, is much more effective. While Cowan pays homage to Genette, he balances the theoretical with well modulated references to his own work as well as the work of writers as various as LP Hartley, JD Salinger, John Fowles, William Faulkner, F Scott Fitzgerald, Jeffrey Eugenides, Peter Ho Davies, Nancy Lee, Joseph Conrad, Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë, as well as many others.

Cowan leaves structure, language, style and grammar for the final chapters of his book. I am not sure I agree with this placement, but I understand the logic. These things are seen as part of the finishing process after the rough stone has been chiselled into shape. In my own teaching, and I suspect that Cowan is the same, these aspects are integral and integrated. Nevertheless, what's offered here is good, solid material that will engage students whether taught early or late in the semester.

The book features a final short chapter on workshopping, a bibliography and a moderately successful index.

Despite it seeming to be more aimed at residential workshops, this book might well also act as a useful textbook for a semester course on writing fiction. However, I am uncertain whether it is available in Australia. The website of Pearson Australia, which is affiliated with publisher Longman, has no details of the book, and the UK website states the book is not available for sale to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Japan, although it appeared to be available on Amazon UK.

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TEXT review

Helpmate at hand

review by Rowena McDonald

Janet Mackenzie
The Editor's Companion, 2nd edition
Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Vic 2011
ISBN 9781107402188
Pb 255pp AUD49.95
eBook ISBN-13: 9781139144452 USD40

How do editors develop their knowledge and skills? Beatrice Davis, book editor at Sydney publishing firm Angus & Robertson from 1937 to 1973 and head of their general editorial department, has been likened to the leader of a craft guild, who acted as a guide, mentor and teacher to her staff, whom she trained on the job (Kent 2001: 214). A strict training regime was undertaken by all new editors at Angus & Robertson, and Elizabeth Wood-Ellem remembers that everything she worked on was looked over by a senior editor (Mackenzie 2005: 154).

Matters are different in today's editing context, and changes to the pace and craft of editing have meant more editors are self-trained and more editors work alone. As Janet Mackenzie writes in the preface to *The Editor's Companion*, 'As in-house training declines and more editors freelance, editing can be a lonely business' (xii). Hence the need for this book, which takes its place alongside others in the genre of advice manuals for editors, rather than style or usage guides, offering explanation and instruction on the principles and methods of preparing a text for publication and the management and relationships involved.

The author is a recent recipient of the George Robertson Award, named in honour of one of the founders of Angus & Robertson and given in recognition of distinguished service to the publishing industry. She is an honorary life member of the Society of Editors (Victoria), a distinguished editor of the Institute of Professional Editors, and a freelancer and trainer with more than 40 years experience in the publishing industry. She is thus

well placed to hand on her knowledge and experience in the form of this companion.

One of the truisms of editing is that an editor cannot afford to have dated knowledge or skills. An editor depends on the tools of the trade, which include the latest editions of core reference books, dictionaries and style guides. *The Editor's Companion* was first published in 2004, and reprinted in 2004, 2007 and 2010. Although much of the content and many of the principles and methods described in the new edition are unchanged, there are many reasons why the first edition will no longer do. The first edition explored what evolving technology (from manuscript and print to screen-based) might mean for the role and practice of the editor, but the intervening years have made the changes more familiar, and the second edition has a surer and more settled approach to the changing work practices brought about by digital publishing. In particular, this new edition incorporates much revised and new material pertaining to the editorial role in digital production. New material includes sections on single source publishing and digital rights, information about the technological and commercial challenges that the e-book presents, and instruction on editing digital/screen publications.

In introducing Chapter 10, 'Working with Documents and Files', Mackenzie writes that 'Many books about editing tell you what to do, but few of them tell you how to go about it' (185). This statement can be applied as a general proposition for the whole book, for one of its strengths is its willingness to pass on tips and techniques which usually can only be garnered from experience, and which are not usually proffered in other books of its kind. Chapter 10 is full of such pointers, explaining how to work with paper and electronic documents, and to my mind is one of the best in the book. Another example of information not usually well covered elsewhere is the section on the reader's report (56–57), which gives valuable instruction from the editor's perspective. A further strength of the book is its coverage – not only does it cover the principles and methods of editing, but also it sets the editor in the context of the publishing industry.

The organising principle of *The Editor's Companion* is based on the divisions of the *Australian Standards for Editing Practice* (devised by the Council of Australian Societies of Editors and available from the Institute of Professional Editors website). This arrangement is both a strength and a weakness. It ensures comprehensive treatment of all aspects of editing, and the reader can see the relevance to industry expectations. However, it also results in a complex structure that is at times confusing and has the reader to-ing and fro-ing throughout the book, and it necessitates many cross-references (not all of which are clear). The very useful section 'Appraising a Document', for example, is found in the chapter on structure, sandwiched between structure for books and structure for screen. Because it seems to describe a method or a procedure rather than a set of principles as in the rest of the chapter, perhaps this section would have been better placed in the methods chapter. Alternatively, throughout the book, both principles and methods could have been grouped together for each element of editing; in this way, the methods of language editing explained in Chapter 9, 'Editing Methods', could have followed on from the principles explained in Chapter 5, 'Language', possibly making it easier for readers to connect principles and methods and to follow more easily the immense amount of information presented in the book.

Aside from the logic of their arrangement, many individual chapters are worth singling out. Chapter 9, 'Editing Methods', is a really marvellous

step-by-step guide to the different levels of editing and is useful enough to keep close by when embarking on an editing job. Chapter 8, 'Proofs', is as good as a short course on the topic, and its proofreading checklist (146-47) is a great addition to the new edition. Likewise, the new sections about proofreading on screen (154) and what to check in proofing screen publications (147-48) are invaluable. The chapter on language is crammed with discussion and instruction on every aspect relevant to an editor of written and spoken language, and it imparts many interesting facts and ideas.

Mackenzie addresses her readers very much as a mentor, encoding the level of understanding an experienced editor has about her practices. The more experienced editor coming to this book will recognise the processes described and the logic behind them, and will thus gain a more self-conscious understanding of her own practice. The audience for the book is complicated by the publisher's blurb, which makes it clear the book is aimed at professional editors but also at writers editing their own work. There may be some truth in this, in that an understanding of the publishing process may be beneficial to an emerging writer, and to be equipped with the terminology surrounding the production of a book will make easier the journey from manuscript to publication. But the focus in *The Editor's Companion* is so fully on editing process and the point of view is so fully the editor's that it is hard to see the utility for a writer. I would say its audience is very much the professional editor, but nevertheless this is a broad category. To the novice editor, the volume of instruction might be daunting, and perhaps a degree of experience is needed to make good use of the many processes described. In many ways, the book seems to be speaking to and especially useful for experienced editors who want a deeper understanding of the publishing process, the structures of a text, and the ways to go about editing a document, in order to translate, carry over or adapt this knowledge and skill to the electronic publishing environment. There is also much valuable information in this book for the student or new graduate of a publishing and editing program, including the comprehensive glossary of publishing and editing terms and the bibliography, which presents a good selection of editing handbooks, usage guides and dictionaries.

While the one-to-one approach to the reader fulfils the book's brief and its title, I would have liked to have seen more textual space given to information on and discussion of the role that the state societies of editors play in providing professional development and a forum for the exchange of ideas, and for fostering a sense of community amongst editors, and also more space to open up debate around such issues as accreditation for editors, discussed in the section 'Portrait of a Profession' in Chapter 1. As a companion, though, this is a very good book to spend time with.

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Rowena McDonald has worked as an editor for 15 years and is currently a second-year PhD candidate at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW. She is researching the role of the publisher's editor, and her study focuses on the general editorial department at Angus & Robertson publishers in the mid-twentieth century.

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TEXT review

Tongue-atorium

review by Dominique Hecq

Francesca Rendle-Short
Bite Your Tongue
Spinifex, North Melbourne, Vic 2011
ISBN 9781876756963
Pb 246pp AUD25.95

In a mix of novel and memoir, *Bite Your Tongue* is the story of a spirited teenage girl's growing up in Queensland, Australia during the 1970s. It is also the story of Glory's relationship with her mother, the morals crusader MotherJoy Solider. MotherJoy's 'Moral Right War' (43) is set in Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's conservative Brisbane 'before Glory lost her tongue' (29). The narrative is framed by the adult daughter's attempt at recovering her own tongue as she researches her family's past in archival materials. As such, it is underpinned by both a feminine and feminist sensibility.

Fiction and autobiography coalesce in this rich work, each informing and illuminating the other with its different voices, thereby highlighting not only the ambivalence at the heart of the mother-daughter relationship, but also the adult daughter's ethical position as a writer. Glory (Francesca) tells her story with respect for the facts, for her protagonists, for her art and for herself. This respect is tinged with awe and ambivalence, or coloured with tongue-in-cheek humour, as befits the occasion, and as already obvious in the title. The result is a writer's personal history, one fuelled by the narrator's enjoyment of her mother-tongue despite the real list of books to ban and to burn propagated by MotherJoy (Francesca's mother, Angel Rendle-Short). This is indeed a potent mix as the image of 'the crucifix orchids the colour of fire' (37) that frame the front door to the family home warn the insouciant visitor/reader. Things are set ablaze in this book: desires, passions, sexualities, as well as rebellious and murderous fantasies. And so flames are snuffed: by religion, repression, fear, shame and guilt. Silence.

The book opens with an evocation of MotherJoy Soldier buried near tourist attraction the Big Pineapple in Queensland, 'ready to rise triumphant when the trumpet sounds and Jesus returns' (1). This opening scene shifts to an x-ray of Angel Rendle-Short's hands looking 'angelic' (1). We are in ambivalent territory: it is the daughter who embeds her mother-as-soldier in a historicised Australian landscape and in the Christian myth, suggesting that mother is in control of the myth, of history and its repetitions, while at the same time she undermines this idea by placing emphasis on the closeness and fragility of the hands raised as if in supplication, jubilation ('are they dancing?' (1)), fear or shame. On closer examination, it is the image, not the text, which strikes the reader on first opening the book. These hands could belong to a writer writing away her own supplication, jubilation, fear or shame on the keyboard.

Kristeva's thinking in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) opens up poetic spaces in which the maternal may be conceived of as a difficult rebellion against its repression in the form of artistic and aesthetic experimentation. Crucial are the various forms of jubilation signalled in rhythm, colour, tone and texture, and a delight in the metaphoric quality of objects. Crucial also are the various forms of symbolic defence against the lethal quality of the drive signalled by syntax and form. The delightful playfulness of *Bite Your Tongue* gestures towards a conception of the maternal *as* ambivalence through a language embedded in patriarchy that ironically recuperates the fragility and theatricality of the feminine.

While disturbing at times, *Bite Your Tongue* displays a deeply complex, open-ended and multifaceted concept of the maternal characterised by playfulness and joy in the power of language. As such, it is an exploration into the nature and function of writing. The mother's realities and difficulties at home with her daughter and in the social world – narrated by Glory and articulated in aesthetic or ethical terms by Francesca – merge by contrast with the possibilities the mother imagines for social change. The mother is an active thinker and organiser, but she muses on her own dreams of moral change in the privacy of her own lounge-room or study at night. Such modes of being are presented in the book as absolutely in disharmony with each other. These contradictory representations of the mother – at once thinking, political and fragile – may seem obvious and therefore unnecessary to articulate.

Yet it is precisely these truths that patriarchy has kept as its dangerous secret, forever trying to suppress. Irigaray's concept of *écriture feminine* is especially inflected towards the mother's body and the patriarchal dominance under which it has suffered, and there are instances when this is stridently voiced in the narrative. See how the following passage poignantly conveys Mother Joy's conflicted and repressed sexuality, the savagery with which she imparts this to her daughter, the pain of it all, and the legacy:

> LITTLE GLORY'S MOTHER SAID *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was a filthy book. Dirty. Smut. It was wicked MotherJoy said and didn't deserve to be read. She said it should go on a dung heap, although she wouldn't want to contaminate her own compost with pages of this kind. Oh No. Writing about it like this makes the older Glory think of the wet smell and hot steam of green dung sploshing in the chookyard—MotherJoy was at home cleaning out the pens—of the squirt out from behind the dicks. The acrid

> smell of fresh urine. MotherJoy slipping and sliding on her feet. (62)

Irigaray accords a special significance to the fluid and multiple aspects of the maternal body, not only a literal and physical body, but also states of being that must be phrased and imagined (1985: 238-39). These speculative thoughts are in affinity with the polymorphous maternal spaces created by Francesca Rendle-Short's *Bite Your Tongue* as exemplified – not without irony – in the above passage and in MotherJoy's famous cooking lessons. On a Saturday afternoon, making tongue is a popular activity with Glory and her sister Gracie. MotherJoy has a medical background: she liked anatomy. 'Now in her fifties, a mother of six children, wife to a head-of-department professor-man, busy here with cooking pots and seasonings and the making of tongue to eat, [she is] giving undivided attention, to the smallest two of her offspring. She [is] on a mission from God' (47). Knives flash above two tongues curled together as 'in a kiss' (47). Knives are wielded. It's an anatomy lesson: 'dorsum, filiform papillae, fungiform pappilae…' (48). Words rattle out of MotherJoy's mouth, and as she does so Glory takes them in, rolls them in her mouth and repeats them *ad libitum.* The most awe-inspiring of these lessons is in chapter 45. Pig's head it is today for our sex education. MotherJoy is savage here. We are talking about the female body, and those private parts are exposed with utter disgust. This is not lost on the little girls. Through some inevitable play of identifications, the effect is momentous:

> …all Glory could see in the pig made up for the table and ready, were different bits of her own body eddying about in the glistening jelly—ovaries, fallopians, uterus, uvula—the anatomical terms tacked into her skin. Very distinctly too, with all the funny syllables stirred in her gut. Something didn't seem quite right. (118)

Most striking throughout the book, perhaps, is the intrusively circular trajectory of the oral drive through the spectacular use of the tongue as metaphor: it invades the daughter-mother relationship within both domestic and social spaces, just as it pervades the daughter's sexual and professional identity. Rendle-Short uses the incremental possibilities of metonymy to enhance the metaphor, thus creating a rich and layered extended metaphor. Tongues are for speaking, kissing, eating, licking, drinking, singing, spitting and praying. Tongues slither, laze, loll, fall off. Tongues tell stories, spit out truths; they lie and sin. Tongues connect human beings with their own bodies, other human beings, souls, pets, animals they eat, plants and objects. When it comes to tongues, human beings dread the knife, which makes them aware that other body parts of their bodies can be cut off. As speaking beings, they lash at others with their tongues, speak in tongues and talk about tongues of flames.

In many ways, tongues are cut in bite-size bits in this book. However, in the end all the bits do fit. Here is no Babel. Here is a fantastical tongue-atorium.

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Dominique Hecq is Associate Professor in Writing at Swinburne University of Technology where she is Research and Discipline Leader. Her latest book is The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century *(Multilingualmatters 2012).* Stretchmarks of Sun *(poetry) will be published by Re.press later this year. She is currently working on* Hush*, a fiction memoir of cot death.*

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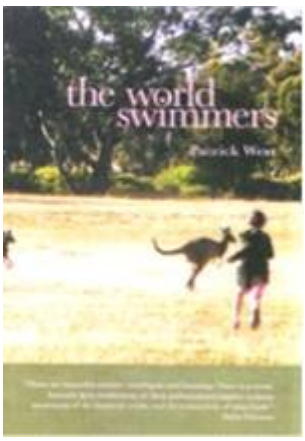
TEXT review

Strange tales of strange lands

review by Sandra Burr



Patrick West
The World Swimmers
The International Centre for Landscape and Language for CREATEC, Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley, WA 2011
ISBN 9780987054517
Pb 68pp AUD19.95

Patrick West's *The World Swimmers* is a slim volume containing only nine short stories. These stories, however, span time and place, from a present day account of a day trip to the Little Desert National Park near Nhill in Victoria, to early nineteenth-century Budapest. It is a curious collection, full of surprise and subtlety and some very accomplished writing, but not all the stories work as well as they could.

As well as the geographic and historic location of the stories, West experiments with voice, populating his tales with a diversity of narrators, including a young emotionally repressed Japanese woman in 'Shame' and a schoolboy on the cusp of understanding the vagaries of life in 'Greenwood'. In 'Nhill', West introduces a fussy, pedantic male protagonist who is nameless; indeed, the other character in the story is only ever referred to as 'my wife'. The use of this device imbues the story with a strange, detached ambience, which tends to alienate the reader until the ending reveals the author's intent. Sometimes, the writing is so dense and convoluted that it begs to be read out loud in order to make sense of it, and I am not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing in such a small collection. 'Nhill',for example, contains one of the longer sentences to be found in a short story, when the narrator, reflecting on the gusting wind says:

> The next moment, however, this had curiously seemed not to be happening. Precisely the absence of even the weakest breeze now manifested itself as decisive, as if the trees that we could see here and there on the landscape, not needing for their equilibrium to be rooted and heavy and thus not being so, were no longer rebelling against their connection

> with the lowest part of the visible desert, but were touching it with only the smallest possible touch, nothing of themselves actually buried into the loose soil. (3)

'Dear Semmelnazi' is a story of profound disappointment and misplaced love told from the point of view of a Hungarian midwife in the same stiff, formal, detached style that reverberates throughout the collection. It is an unusual and compelling tale, with themes of adoption and incest that Craig Thompson addresses in his recently published graphic novel, *Habibi* (Allen & Unwin, 2010). Many of West's stories contain sexual references, sometimes overt and sometimes less so, which is further illustrative of the clever but understated way that the author has attempted to unify this disparate collection. In the last story in the book, 'The World Swimmers', West has sown indirect references to many of the preceding stories by repeating previously used words, phrases and images, resulting in a similarly unifying effect.

West also likes to play with style. 'Nhill' and 'Shame' are sparse, desiccated linear narratives, while 'U' not only introduces another geographical dimension, but through its dreamlike, elliptical, poetic, pantoum-like style is quite mesmerising. West is a confident storyteller, and this collection shows his writerly skills to great effect. His poetic descriptions crackle with atmosphere and hum with the evocative scents of grass, sea and soil, for example, 'a prospect of palest olive' (4), together with compelling imagery, '… her eyes are glowing like oceans of snow, like grasslands of the moon' (68).

He likes to surprise his readers with unexpected twists and shock endings that are sometimes needed to make sense of the story to which they are attached. Such endings can also work to lift the occasional pedestrian story to greater heights. This device doesn't always work, with 'Now You Know What Women Have to Put Up With All the Time'being one of the less successful pieces in the collection. The intentionally muddy plot feels more contrived than clever, and the heavy-handed ending is both predictable and unsurprising. It does feel, at times, that West is consciously trying to manipulate his readers. 'The Japanese Stripper from the Inland Sea' is an odd piece that seems to want to teach us some kind of a lesson, but exactly what that lesson is, is not clear. The title story, 'The World Swimmers', is futuristically strange, being both lyrical and mysterious with more of West's beautiful imagery but also intriguingly incomprehensible sentences like, 'Now you are about to come to the end of the beginning of your journey' (62).

Despite his obvious talent, this collection does not quite jell for me. The author is too present, and the stories feel self-consciously collated. It is as if West is attempting to present a portfolio that will showcase his abilities as a writer, but the overall effect is claustrophobic and too intense for such a small collection. The inclusion of a few more stories, and perhaps some longer ones, may have softened the impact.

Despite this, it is an interesting collection, and as soon as I began reading I wanted to know more about the author. Unfortunately, the book contains no author details except for a list of places where West has been previously published. An internet search found Dr West to be a Senior Lecturer in Professional and Creative Writing at Deakin University as well as a research leader for a major project on the volcanic landscape of south-west Victoria and south-east South Australia, which explains not only his

passion for the intricacies of storytelling and the written word but also his fascination with landscape.

Aesthetically, the book falls a little short: the production values are uninspiring with small, faint print, and the cover is drab and unappealing with an illustration that appears to have little bearing on the stories inside. Despite these quibbles, this is a fascinating body of work although I believe West's next collection will be even better.

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TEXT review

When the inconceivable occurs

review by Ruth Williams

Sandra Arnold
Sing No Sad Songs: Losing a Daughter to Cancer
Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, NZ 2011
ISBN 9781927145067
Pb 256pp NZD35

Sandra Arnold holds a 'qualification' that no other parent ever hopes to have to earn: in 2002, her daughter, Rebecca, died from a rare appendix cancer at twenty-three years of age. *Sing No Sad Songs* is a memoir that covers several years, beginning in 1995, the year Arnold and her family travelled to Brazil, and ending with Arnold reflecting on life without Rebecca, six years later.

When Rebecca was diagnosed, Arnold's general practitioner, Peter Law, declared, 'This should never have happened. This is the wrong age group. She should never have cancer in this age group'. Arnold replied, 'But she did' (86). It is through this prism that we are invited to share Arnold's experience of the loss of her youngest child and the effect this has had on her life. In the foreword, Fiona Farrell states that she is 'not a big fan of those disease-of-the-week TV specials' that toss the word 'grief' around until it loses meaning, adding that she feels that this book reclaims the word (9). If you have a desire to gain some understanding of what it is to grieve the death of a loved one, immersing yourself in *Sing No Sad Songs* will provide you with an honest and intimate perspective on one of life's greatest challenges.

Arnold's reasons for publishing the book are commendable:

> so that it would be accessible to others outside academia, as a way for other bereaved parents to recognise and give voice to their own stories, and for the non-bereaved to gain

> an understanding of what it feels like to be in the skin of a bereaved parent. (University of Canterbury 2011)

The book was originally written as the creative component of a Doctor of Philosophy in creative writing, so I decided to read the exegesis that accompanied it (Arnold 2011). I found myself very much drawn to the areas Arnold explored in the exegesis: 'psychological and sociological theories of grief, how grief is dealt with in Western societies, the language of grief and how narrative can be used as a tool to help the bereaved' (University of Canterbury 2011). It is a fascinating exploration of this often ignored and yet inevitable stage of our lives.

In the exegesis (Chapter 5, 'Creative Non-fiction') Arnold points out that she has consciously aimed to write a memoir that fits within the 'creative non-fiction' classification. She elaborates by citing Gutkind (2001):

> … an important element of creative nonfiction is that through the personal voice, a universal viewpoint should be represented… In fiction, facts may be entirely made-up and snippets from the author's memory may be embellished. In creative nonfiction, facts should not be falsified and the writer is not concealed behind a fictional character (Gutkind 2001)… The "creative" in creative nonfiction does not refer to the invention of facts, but to how those facts are presented. (Arnold 2011)

Sing No Sad Songs sits comfortably within this category, with Arnold's incorporation of 'creative nonfiction elements of scene-setting, dialogue, description, personal point of view and voice' (Exegesis Chapter 2, 'Theories of Grief').

In the book's introduction, Arnold is quick to point out that she is aware that 'the experience of grief is different for each individual' (12). She cites Arthur Frank, from *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995): 'people tell stories … not to provide a map that can guide others – each must create his own – but rather to witness the experience of reconstructing one's own map' (17). This idea of bearing witness to the experience of a fellow human being appeals to me and is an important aspect of this memoir.

Arnold goes on to acknowledge that one of her concerns writing the memoir was to ensure that Rebecca would not be defined by her suffering and death. It is for this reason that Arnold decides to spend around forty pages of the book relating the story of a year spent in Brazil in 1995 with Rebecca and her husband, Chris. We join the family in Brazil in the first chapter. It wasn't long before I found myself losing interest in the trip to Brazil. This section read like a travelogue and detracted from the focus of the memoir on the experience of 'losing a daughter to cancer', as expressed in the book's subtitle. Considering the content of the book, it may sound heartless to respond in this way. I understand why Arnold wanted to include this section; in it we witness a Rebecca who is a 'vibrant, multi-talented young woman' (12). But I think that Arnold is underestimating her readers and her own writing. It seems to me that readers will pick up this sense of Rebecca very clearly elsewhere.

On reflection, I consider the most useful role this book can play is to fulfil Arnold's desire to provide an example to other bereaved parents as a way for them to recognise and give voice to their stories. I'm not completely convinced that it will also 'generate discussion in this country about our

"death denying culture" and the way people react to the bereaved', which is another of her objectives (University of Canterbury 2011). In Chapter 2 of the exegesis, 'Theories of Grief', Arnold refers to Prof Tony Walter's rejection of 'the idea of modern society being death-denying'. She goes on to say that he 'points to influences that have encouraged a more open attitude towards discussing death.' This is certainly my experience. I think the phrase 'death-denying culture' is about ready to be laid to rest.

Arnold's intention of generating discussion about the way people react to the bereaved is elaborated upon when she says, 'The non-bereaved sometimes have difficulty in empathising with bereaved parents. In Western societies language often fails when talking to the bereaved and euphemisms, platitudes and clichés are used to express condolence because many people do not know what to say' (University of Canterbury 2011). My concern is that these observations come across as criticisms of 'the non-bereaved'. My sense is that this kind of response to the non-bereaved will only make them feel worse, and less likely to want to be around a newly bereaved person in case they say the wrong thing, or for fear of not wanting to upset a friend or family member. In a perfect world, we would all know exactly what to say or do, or what not to say or do. While it may seem unfair to expect more of the recently bereaved, it seems to me that they are, albeit most likely unwillingly, placed in the role of educators for those of us who have not experienced such a devastating event in their lives. At least this is the opportunity.

I admire Arnold's willingness to share all aspects of her experiences, including the seeking out of alternative therapies in the hope of finding a cure or at least a way of extending her daughter's life. This is not the kind of information many would be eager to reveal, especially as it is an area about which many people hold strong views. To me, it was really just another example of her love for her daughter, the fact that she would try anything that could possibly turn around this terrible experience. Another time she exhibits such a willingness is where she writes of having felt comforted by information she received from two 'channels': the first Blair, who channeled Tabaash, whom she met at a seminar on death and dying, and the second Yasmeen, a resident of Christchurch who channelled an entity called Raman. I admire Arnold's decision to include this aspect of her journey, especially the way in which she acknowledges how beneficial these interactions were.

Reviewing a book that is of such a personal nature is not an easy task. One is tempted to only say 'nice things' because the author has already been through so much. My sense is that to do this would be following the same behaviour that Arnold found upsetting in the days and weeks after Rebecca's death: that such a profound experience and the response to that experience deserve more than mere platitudes. Just as Arnold declares that the experience of grief is different for each individual, I assert that the experience of reading such a memoir is different for each individual, and for that reason, I recommend that if you have had a similar experience, or wish to understand what it might be like, *Sing No Sad Songs* is a very good place to start.

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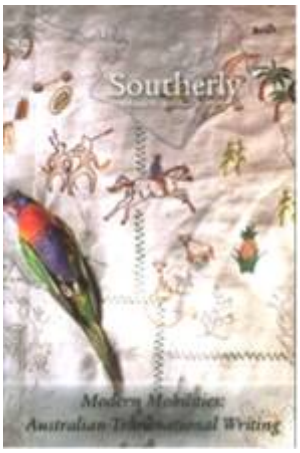
TEXT review

Australian literature goes mobile

review by Jay Daniel Thompson



David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon (eds)
Southerly: Modern Mobilities: Australian-Transnational Writing
Brandl and Schlesinger, Sydney 2011
ISBN 9781921556272
Pb 250pp AUD29.95

The key themes of the most recent edition of *Southerly* are suggested by the subtitle *Modern Mobilities: Australian-Transnational Writing*. In her editorial, Elizabeth McMahon reports that this issue will explore 'modern mobilities and how they dismantle and re-create notions of identity, home, family, nation and literature' (7).

The contributions include poems, scholarly essays, short stories and reflective pieces. They engage with such themes as travel, photography and immigration, and the experiences of Australian authors working overseas. The collection concludes with reviews of several recently published Australian titles.

A personal highlight is Jessica White's story 'The Country of Boats'. The chief protagonist is a mermaid, but this piece is a long way from Disney. White provides a subtle and beautifully-written treatise on the horrors of colonialism. Consider the following passage, in which the mermaid witnesses 'fair people' overtake the land upon which she has been living:

> …they pulled down trees and built roads and huts, then houses of mud that they painted white… When the dark people became angry at the fair people's deeds, they were killed. It was a sorry thing to do, the mermaid thought, hovering by the shore and flinching at gunshots in the bush. (14)

'The Country of Boats' nicely demonstrates the politically subversive potential of fairy tales and fantasy.

Also commendable is Hayley Katzen's story entitled 'Postcards'. This piece focuses on Richard, a married man who is spotted kissing another woman by a friend of his wife's. This friend, Avril, ostensibly heads away on an overseas trip and regularly sends postcards to the couple. Richard is relieved that Avril has left Australia – until he spots her in a Sydney pub. Katzen's story provides a perceptive and at times psychologically unnerving study of guilt, desire and dishonesty. The characters are well-rounded, and the events described throughout the narrative are entirely believable.

On the non-fiction front, I was impressed by Maggie Nolan's essay on Gordon Matthews' autobiographical book *An Australian Son* (1996). Matthews was adopted at birth and came to identify as Aboriginal, largely on account of his olive skin. In his early thirties, Matthews 'began searching for his biological parents in order to verify his Aboriginality' (89). He was unsettled to discover that his biological father was, in fact, Sri Lankan and that there was no Aboriginal blood in their family. I was previously unaware of Matthews' text, and Nolan admits that it has received scant scholarly attention. Nolan convincingly argues that *An Australian Son* bears out Peter Sutton's observation that 'true reconciliation can only be "a state of being between persons, or a resolution of issues within one's consciousness"' (102).

The most ambitious contribution to this *Southerly* is provided by literary studies scholar Bill Ashcroft. A crucial trope of Ashcroft's essay is what he refers to as 'the transnation'. This 'appears at first to be a familiar term based on the idea of the transnational' (19). However, Ashcroft explains that he has

> coin(ed) the term to refer to much more than "the international", or the "transnational"… "Transnation" is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This "outside" is geographical, cultural and conceptual, a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who traverse the various categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted, who live "in-between". (19)

Ashcroft's essay touches on a broad range of themes: national identity, cultural memory, utopianism, whiteness, Aboriginality. He supports his points with reference to literary texts such as Arnold Zable's *Café Scheherazade* (2001), as well as the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Indeed, I suggest that Ashcroft's conceptualisation of 'transnation' is deserving of a book-length study. Such a study could perhaps give clarity to passages such as the following, in which Ashcroft borrows Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'smooth space':

> Smooth space takes form when the striated space of government institutions, fixed concepts and essentialized peoples are broken into their composing forces, caught up in a swirling whirlpool that is capable of mixing these forces in new ways to produce monsters that may defy the categorizing machiners of the institutions of striated space. (20)

Who or what are 'essentialized peoples'? What are these 'monsters' that 'defy the categorizing machiners of the institutions of striated space'?

Ashcroft does not really provide answers to these questions, but he might have room to do so in a monograph.

Similarly, Lucy Sussex' essay could be developed into a much-longer work, or a collection of works. Sussex looks at Agnes Murphy, a little-known Australian writer who moved to London in the late nineteenth century and sold her only novel *One Woman's Wisdom* (1895) to Routledge. Sussex rightly argues that Murphy was an 'unconventional and remarkable woman' (141). Sussex mentions the homoerotic elements of both *One Woman's Wisdom* and Murphy's life, and suggests that this novel does 'prefigure' 'later lesbian writing' such as that penned by Australian authors like Finola Moorhead (141). A useful avenue of enquiry would involve investigating the similarities and differences (stylistic, ideological) between *One Woman's Wisdom* and more contemporary lesbian fiction. In pursuing such investigation, though, I would caution against falling into Sussex' trap of actually labelling Murphy as 'lesbian'. There is no suggestion in Sussex' essay that Murphy ever used that term to describe herself.

This edition of *Southerly* provides a diverse collection of insights into Australian literature and the complex roles it plays in the world, particularly during an era of globalisation. The contributions present a plethora of fascinating topics and ideas to contemplate and research further.

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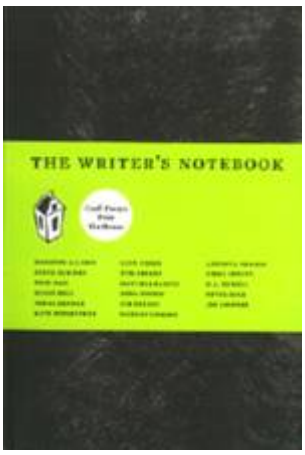
TEXT review

Inventive essays on writing

review by Sue Bond



The Editors of Tin House Books
The Writer's Notebook: Craft Essays from Tin House
Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon 2009
ISBN 9780979419812
Pb 264pp USD18.95

Tin House began as a literary magazine in the United States in 1999, venturing into publishing books three years later, and now also hosts annual writers' workshops in Portland, Oregon. According to the brief introduction by Lee Montgomery, it is from these workshops that this book originated, and it is a stimulating and provocative collection.

Not all of the contributing writers were familiar to me, but all of the seventeen essays are worth reading, with several being exceptionally useful, both to writers and teachers of writing, who will garner ideas aplenty. The topics discussed are place, sex, simplicity, editing (using *The Great Gatsby*'s evolution as an example), character motivation, fairy tales, material, time, imaginary worlds, scene-making, Shakespeare, revision, poetry, telling versus showing, and empathy. And two essays that are difficult to describe in one word: 'Let Mot Incorrect' by Jim Crusoe, which is about getting to the 'right word' through many wrong ones, and 'Lost in the Woods' by Antonya Nelson, a rather beautiful dissertation on lostness in story, the characters' search for each other, loneliness and aloneness.

There are dozens and dozens of books on writing, and they can be categorised into the following: inspirational texts that discuss what it means to be a writer and to have a 'writing life', practical 'how-to' books that often have exercises, and books that deal with the business of writing and earning a living from it. This book is mainly a how-to but with a strong intellectual edge and no exercises, and it is inspiring because of its

energy and inventiveness. It would sit well with other writing texts by such authors as Annie Dillard, Mark Tredinnick, Anne Lamott and Betsy Lerner.

The first essay is by Dorothy Allison, and simply called 'Place'. It is arresting and full-blooded and persuasively written, starting the collection with a knockout blow. She insists on the importance of place, makes you believe it is integral to a good story, and uses examples with language so alive you will not forget her exhortations. 'Place is feeling', she writes, 'and feeling is something a character expresses' (8). Her essay is full of richly expressed emotion itself.

Steve Almond writes amusingly about writing about sex, a notoriously difficult task. But he manages to quickly and simply dispel this terror by suggesting the writer write the worst sex scene imaginable, thereby taking away 'the pressure for the sex to be good' so that 'it frees you up to write about what really matters, which is the way sex reveals character' (20).

The next particularly startling essay is by Lucy Corin, a novelist and Associate Professor in English at the University of California. In 'Material', she presents the idea of looking at how your writing appears on the page, arguing that form and content are equally important. She likes to think of alternative ways of creating story, and 'making something' (75) is how she thought of her writing when she was a beginner. She believes a writer can 'look at the material you produce to find your material' (77), sort of treating words as play dough and examining the shape of the story on the page to find out what type of story it is. She illustrates her argument by drawing pages of well known text using lines on a piece of paper. By using such examples as Beckett's *Molloy* and Hemingway's 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place', she compares the rich denseness of the former with the airiness of the latter. She also discusses the shape of, and motifs in, Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'. As a way of thinking anew about writing, and generating more and better stories, this is an original method.

Tom Grimes writes 'There Will Be No Stories in Heaven', a piece about time, specifically how, because it is limited and we are all going to die, story exists. Without it, there is no story because it needs – we need – limits and boundaries:

> For writers, our stories are amorphous until we discover how time controls them. Every great story contains a "clock", an intrinsic timekeeper. Lacking this, a story could go on forever. Yet, no matter how great a story is, we long for it to end. Endings offer us solace, and time, not infinity, delivers it. Time organizes, advances, and limits a story, thereby satisfying the reader's craving for narrative coherence and closure. (94)

He uses the examples of *The Great Gatsby* and the stories of writers such as Alice Munro and John Cheever to illustrate different and inventive uses of time.

There are many other jewels within this book that will benefit most writers. Jim Shephard states boldly in his essay ('Generating Fiction from History and/or Fact') that 'The whole project of literature is about the exercise of the empathetic imagination' (243). It takes us out of ourselves and puts us in the place of others, takes us to other worlds and times. Chris

Offutt writes about the revision process, giving a blueprint for how he goes about writing drafts of a story. 'There are no shortcuts in art' (210) he advises, and in order to 'serve the story', the writer must never give in to laziness or the easy way out. When he writes 'To me, the final product is like an iceberg: you only see ten percent of the actual work, but that other ninety percent is still there' (210), it may sound like a cliché, but it's an apt description of the process of carving out a story.

I unreservedly recommend this book to writers for its innovative and imaginative suggestions from an obviously accomplished and fearless group of writers. Beginners will be infused with the wonder, beauty and challenge of prose and poetry creation; those more experienced will be glad of new ideas to hone their skills.

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TEXT review

Tin House Talk: Writers on Writing

review by Helen Gildfind

The Editors of Tin House Books
The World Within: Writers Talk
Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon 2007
ISBN 9780977698967
Pb 356pp USD16.95

Tin House is a literary quarterly based in Portland, Oregon. As well as publishing fiction and poetry, this magazine publishes interviews with writers and graphic novelists from around the world. *The World Within* is now packaged as one of four titles in Tin House's *The Writer's Series* collection, along with *Plotto*, *The Writer's Notebook* and *The Story about the Story*. *The World Within* compiles twenty-three interviews, including ones with Nuruddin Farah, Barney Rosset, Roddy Doyle, George Saunders, Ken Kesey, Tracy Kidder, James Salter, Gus Van Sant and Francine Prose. Interviewers include Abbie Fields, Elissa Schappell, Ellen Fagg, Todd Haynes, Rob Spillman, Regan Good, James Schiff and Carla Perry.

One of the most striking pieces in this collection is Heather Larimer's interview with Charles D'Ambrosio. This interview begins with her narrative recount of driving out to Philipsburg, Montana, an ex-mining town where D'Ambrosio ('hard to reach and possibly crazy', 47) sleeps in abandoned mine shafts and spends his days combing the landscape for junk. Upon arrival, Larimer tells D'Ambrosio she wishes to spend the day doing whatever he usually does: they go off into the wilds to 'shoot his gun' (48), explore mines and wander the ghost town's desolate streets. Despite this ominous narrative opening, their subsequent dialogue unfolds in a captivatingly casual and intimate way. In interviews like these, it is clear that the interviewer has 'read' her subject well, bringing a deep knowledge of D'Ambrosio's biography and writing to her conversation in a way that allows her to reveal glimmers of his eccentric and painful mindscape, as well as his unusual – but fruitful – writing practices.

D'Ambrosio sticks to writing essays when he feels like 'poison' and is only able to treat himself and his fictional characters 'like shit' (53). He writes fiction when he's not being a 'shithead' (54), for he sees fiction as something that a writer has to 'haul' from themselves 'without relief' (53), something which requires an excess of love and kindness and an egoless absorption in another's story. Interviewers like Larimer seem to bring a similar sort of love and absorption to their craft of interviewing.

Likewise, Rachel Resnick's interview with Rikki Ducornet reads like a conversation between friends, moving as it does from the nuts-and-bolts of a writer's research and rituals (Ducornet dances for an hour before settling to write) to talking about such absurdities as magic mushrooms and Ducornet's hand-raised dinner snails. Ducornet discusses the evolution of *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition* (Resnick asks, 'Was it born in a postcoital fever dream?', 125), which began with the eroticism of the fan itself ('like the thighs of a woman opening and closing!', 125). After falling in love with the fan-maker, Ducornet got to know the Marquis de Sade by reading what he read when he was in prison. Her thoughts on obscenity, pleasure and the 'intolerable reality' of a body in pain are insightful (139), as are her thoughts on the destructive objectifications of pornography as opposed to what she calls the 'sexual soul' within us all, which 'delights' in experiencing the 'natural' world (137-38). Her forthright views lighten up an interview that traverses complex and often dark themes ('Bullshit!' is her response to being called school-marmish; 'absurd' is her summation of the category 'woman writer', 137).

The collection also includes interviews with writers in less common genres, such as the Iranian-born graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi, and Lydia Davis, a translator who also writes her own fiction. Satrapi talks about how the international language of images has allowed her to 'assimilate' (285) into Western culture. She talks about the 'nice kind of creative narcissism' which is the 'basis' of all artists (as for egocentrism, '*that* is bad', 289), how humour is 'subversive and against all hating' (289) and how laughter is the 'highest level of understanding' (289). Like Narrudin Farah and Claribel Alegría, Satrapi writes from the perspective of exile. Davis offers insight into the world of the translator – that writer who attempts to break the exiles that language barriers can create. She gives us direct insight into the obsessive perfectionism upon which a good translation depends, whether that 'good' translation is one that strives to make itself sound as if it *is* the original text, or one that strives to retain a 'flavor of foreignness' that never lets a reader forget what they are reading (77). Davis attempts to create texts 'through' which a reader can see the original's content *and* style (78), no mean feat considering that one of her largest projects – one that saw her wrestling with single words for days – was translating Proust's *Swann's Way*.

Other interviewees include the politely labelled 'senior' writer James Salter, who, when asked if he's ever had a break from being a writer, says 'why would you want a break?' (278). Denis Johnson gives insight into novels that have taken decades to write, the freedom of not caring about self revelation in fiction ('you should write only about those things that you would never confide in anyone', 191) and the problem of writing other people's stories ('it's not tricky, you either do it or you don't', 191). Anita Desai talks about respecting the privacy of her characters ('at a certain point your characters shut the door and vanish', 92), the problem of writing ugly characters, and the cultural differences between living in – and writing of – India and America, countries with opposed perceptions of individual autonomy. Tracy Chevalier talks about the cultural divide

between eras, discussing the difficulty of staying true to the social and psychological realities of her historical novels' characters. Chevalier also voices irritation at 'the arrogance' of her male writing peers 'who feel they can make a big sweeping statement about American culture' in their novels (40). She sees books such as Franzen's *The Corrections* as 'big sky scrapers' ('the great penis in the sky'), unlike novels by writers like Atwood, which make sweeps of the psyche and are more like 'horizontal art galleries' (41). It is a great strength of this collection that such diverse writers – with such a diversity of concerns and opinions – speak so confidently alongside one another.

I usually read interviews with writers whose work I have already read and enjoyed, and I was unsure if I would relate to the Tin House collection as I only know a few of its subjects. The sense of genuine emotional and intellectual engagement that radiates from these interviews, however, plus their focus on universal issues such a politics and craft, has shown me how such a collection is, in fact, a really good way of broadening one's reading horizons. I can think of no better recommendation than to say that *The World Within* has left me excited and inspired by writers whose work I am yet to read, but am now determined to.

Helen Gildfind lives in Melbourne and has had essays, short stories, book reviews and poems published in Australia and overseas.

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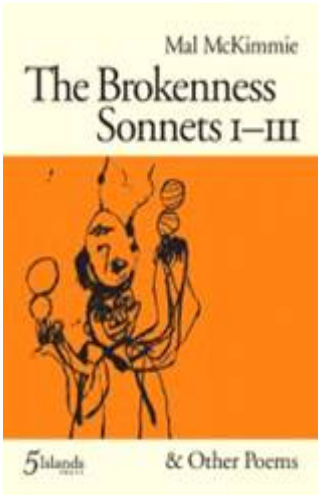
TEXT review

‘This is Lazarus. / I need an outside line.’

review by Marion May Campbell



Mal McKimmie
The Brokenness Sonnets I-III & Other Poems
Five Islands Press, Parkville, Vic 2011
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Born in Perth in 1964, Mal McKimmie has travelled widely and has worked as a survey hand, deckhand, vineyard labourer, fruit-picker, dishwasher, laundry folder and part-time ranger. He has also worked in welfare, with people labelled as having a disability, and with people diagnosed with mental illness. This wide-ranging social experience, along with his broad and eclectic erudition, might partly explain what fellow-poet Philip Salom evoked at the Melbourne launch [1] of this book as his utterly singular talent, producing poetry like no one else’s in Australia.

McKimmie has found in affliction striking ways of addressing a contemporary reader’s own brokenness and fragmentation: registering the radical shaking of epilepsy in his first full-length collection, *Poetileptic* (2005), and more recently, in seizing his orphic opportunity from the potential catastrophe of three strokes. Flannery O’Connor wrote, ‘In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow’ (Baumgaertner 1987), and we don’t so much *follow* the poet as *lose* the compass with him, just as his cast of personae and ‘homunculi’ find so much that is a gift in the loss of control that is *blessèd illness*.

Electing the sonnet, moving between Shakespearean and Petrarchan modes through to more elastic unrhymed versions, the three eponymous sequences make over for contemporary sensibilities the form eminently suited to carpe diem, metaphysical conceit, iconoclastic questioning, rebel dissonance and witty paradox. In the twisting mimicry of syntax and

lineation, the body disjunct writ(h)es its new knowledge. Through slant rhyme's play, which, like the funfair ride, can turn to terror, or through nursery rhyme-like punning chains, the 'reason' of loftily pronounced *Diagnosis* is triumphantly undone.

Calling his entrapment *the carnival of Un*, McKimmie recognises how carnival parodies the law and institutional discourses which oppress and reduce just as they claim to govern and discipline. The syntax in some remarkable sonnets from the first sequence, 'The Brokenness Sonnets I', enacts the excruciating sense of the hamster's entrapment in the tumbling wheel, from which the scream or the gushing evacuation of self might be the only line of egress (Deleuze 1988):

> I was something then; or happy. But the world
> is a calling carnival of Un,
> a ferris wheel rolling down a long hill
> to the sea. Hands strap me in, I flail
> a blind rage: run a hamster's panic in
> this cage; forever further away from me. (13)

Here the terror of the unrelenting downward ride is magnified by the ditching of initial capitals, the 'rage-cage' internal rhyme and the eloquent awkwardness of the stressed approximate rhyme of lines 9 and 13: 'Un-in'. McKimmie takes us to the site of catastrophic near-effacement. If the role of poetry is to concentrate the event or encounter – whether amorous, exhilarating, revelatory, painful or devastating – within the sensate and affective intelligence of the reader, then this work frequently succeeds at a high level. McKimmie takes us along the ravaged routes of aphasia, along which circumlocution and approximation breed panic and confusion, where punning becomes a stutter and performs the undoing of language and of humanity. Here the foetally vulnerable and uncoordinated self tentatively emerges post-disaster as syllable by syllable is rescued from the language litter. You experience how these vandal events have routed the site of speech. You recognise yourself in the shadow world of the person paralysed, helplessly mute, very nearly wiped out.

In questioning how torture operates, Elaine Scarry (1985) argues how the interrogation cell is at once a metaphor for the body and also an evil parody of the living space, of the familiar, hospitable room. In some ways the parallels here are striking: torture is geared to the extraction of speech, a speech which will betray, a betrayal for which the one tortured is made responsible; but here the torture is in *not* being able to extract speech from the self held captive by disaster.

> Reeves was Superman, being American,
> now is more so. But I am Clark Kent in a
> phonebooth, fumbling with my catheter;
> and she loves me from the waist down only,
> indifferent and efficient as a bedpan. (16)

The crippled attempt at self-transformation, 'fumbling with my catheter', is cruelly mocked by the approximate rhyme: 'Kent in a'/ 'catheter'; and there is no Lois Lane awaiting this prostheticised Kent. McKimmie knows how to dump the reader into the helplessness implicit in the nurse's attention to the paralysed lower limbs: 'and she loves me from the waist down only'. The Super*man*-Ameri*can* association finds its derisory fall-out in the final rhyme, ringing out the banal instrumentality of 'bed*pan*'.

Unlike Susan Sontag (1979), who refuses the fix of illness as metaphor, McKimmie mines the disaster of stroke for its potential both for metaphor and metamorphosis: language is the agent of the metamorphic experience, language wrung back from the abysmal shelf of utter silencing, where brain is deadlocked outside words. Here the poem is at once site of obliteration and of literally painstaking reassembly. Casting out tentative line after tentative line, the poet floats a fragile net across the abyss – between silenced and immobilised self and selves in flight – and the verbal network in turn becomes a cradle for an emergence of new selves who dare to fly in dream. The old Telephone Time Announcement protocol 'On the third stroke it will be...' lends a structural pun for the temporal arrest of the cerebral stroke, a shocking and wrenching epiphany in which cosmic space-time seems to collapse into self as black hole:

> I stand around like a bathroom fixture.
>
> But at the third stroke, all the time that I have kept
> falls into me and falls complete: I have wept
> equally for sorrow as for joy:
> my tears have filled, with the sea, the sky.
> O my love if you were near you'd hear me shout:
> See swimming up that rainbow, rainbow trout!
> (20)

Witness the miracle of lexical mutation: the upstream arching of the trout is dreamed through the gymnastics of language: from the rainbow, biblical signal of reconciliation after catastrophe, leaps the metonymically associated 'trout'. *I might be silent; I might be immobile but in this line I fly* – through magical affiliation. This is also to make a jester's triumph out of the 'carnival of Un'– from the 'bathroom fixture' paralysis to the gravity-defying trout's flight.

McKimmie's would-be flyer might be initially (at the third stroke) a nameless miscreant sans flight – a 'failed invention'.

> ...My name is a disgrace.
> Call me something else, call me Icarus.
> With these hands I'll make a pair of wings
>
> for all my life I've been a junkie dreaming
> of a hyperdermic filled with emptiness,
> escape from this, a blue oblivion.
> Of the forgetfulness of fugue and flight,
> of God as an annihilating light;
> and all the wide-screen sky as television. (21)

Here the contemporary simile ('wide-screen sky') reactivates the etymology of television as long-sightedness (or God-like omniscience), and the 'blue oblivion' whispers its seductions in the five-fold alliteration: 'o*f* the *f*orget*f*ulness of *f*ugue and *f*light', as the ultimate fantasy of escape, but divine light, like the Western Australian light that 'crushes like psychosis' (57), is also figured as terror: a total wipe-out of self and world. 'God as an annihilating light' turns the living sky to digital simulacrum, testifying only to its emptiness, to the ultimate loss of all reference. This is a potent performance of suicidal desire, in the way it builds, with the stress

falling on ‘all’, to the awesome culmination of the mind-flash: wide-screen nothingness.

The individual hero Icarus is soon renounced for collective agency, and here is a sort of Deleuzo-Guattarian (Deleuze & Guattari 1986) opportunity to identify with a multitude, as swarming potential:

> The Icari have flown since birth began.
> The myth is not outside you, you must learn
> to fly in your dreams or will burn. (21)

The wounding and silencing of the human self lead the persona to intensify affiliation with the whole chain of species, a phoneme or two separating him from the ‘chimp’ as ‘chum’:

> I am your chimp, your chump, your chum, your
> one
> and only friend. There at the beginning,
> I will still be there at the end, swinging
> in the jungle of your DNA from
> chromosome to chromosome — ninety-eight
> percent of you is me. But you give weight
> undue to two percent; up spring cities,
> churches, nuclear plants. (22)

What is a man: this desperate need to cross the abyss of the ‘missing link’, back to his nuclear-plant and bomb-building humanity? The following sonnet picks up the genetic baton, as it were:

> Who among you now will sing a bridge for me?
> Left behind, I was the first made last;
> when blesséd [sic] illness stuns your tongue to
> silence
> you can hear me keening lonely in your past.
> Search for me there. Sing your way to the
> speechless
> centre of your wound. Then give me your song.
> (22)

This is a magnificent address to hubristic Homo sapiens who fancies himself at creation’s pinnacle: true humanity might be the humble recognition of the connectedness of all beings, however lowly they might figure on the evolutionary scale. The invitation, ‘Sing your way to the speechless / centre of your wound. Then give me your song.’, derives its beauty and power from its artful shaping of silence. The breath-pause after ‘speechless’ and the caesura after ‘wound’ open a hiatus through which some sublimely ‘keening’ ‘song’ might be dreamed.

In another moment of correction or hierarchical reversal to the advantage of the selfless, McKimmie adopts the persona of Gauguin to address Van Gogh as Master, and in this strange but fascinating re-imagining, the Dutch painter’s God becomes, in his death-dealing, the agent of obliteration, stamping out of the genial spirit at the very same time as He

> ...spools out his golden thread from fields near
> Arles,
> stills the writhing pines, thumbs out those stars.
> (24)

In marvellous compression, McKimmie has God as ultimate, perverse Weaver spooling the painter's destiny out as golden thread from the last cornfield painting, willing the extinguishment of the passionate intensity of His own creature. This casual annihilation of the storm centre of that genius brings the scandal of Vincent Van Gogh's death back to life, along with the blazing magnificence of his amplifications. Exploiting the sonnet's last quatrain to host the beautiful paradox (survival through art, along with the God-vocation through sacrifice of self or suicide), McKimmie gives his Gauguin this fervent avowal:

> While the shadows of my master's blade and
> gun
> fall between God's earth and the world of men,
> deep down in the soil, still as an archetype
> I wait; listening for his, and God's return. (24)

The comma-hiatus after 'his' in the sonnet's ultimate line marks something like wonder before miracle. Here, in this breath pause, it's as if you can sense the pulse of prayer for the poet's return to language.

In 'Escape from the Rat-Gods' McKimmie ties the sense of being a psychiatrist's lab-rat on medication to the *kabbas* or reincarnated rat relatives of the Rat-Goddess Kali Mata. Divine consciousness is everywhere, in the temple's pillars, a blessing even in the food the holy temple rats eat.

> But in Calcutta the beggar I could not shake
> was Art.
> God fell from my head. She rose in my heart.
> (25)

The hope of poems to come throws a lifeline: the empty begging bowl of the as-yet-wordless poem receives an inspiration, an intake of breath. The resurrection of hope is through this coupling: art-heart. This shaking of the hierarchies (male God-female beggar) is pervasive in the collection and the proximity to the other, sublime or abject, is just one more gift acquired through *blessèd illness*.

So, too in 'Requiescat in Pace':

> Time to marshal the troops of memory,
> name each fatality:
> [...]
> Lost is your war with the past:
> with your heart in your helmet, in your hands,
>
> return. No more need for weapons. At ease.
> Expect nightmares, but after nightmares, peace.
> Unfurl the white flag of your surrender:
> she waits for you as patient as a mirror,
> but she is not a mirror, she is free.
> And you love her as the wave loves vast the
> sea. (25)

There is a magnificent acceptance of new limitations which reveal their underside as immensity [2], through this recognition of the freedom of the beloved. There's a lovely pun in the ascription of 'patient' to the beloved attending the patient, she becoming thus quite logically as 'patient as a mirror', mirroring the patient's stillness and silence.

In the closing line the syntactically odd, almost quaint, placement of 'vast', rendering it as an adverbial modifier of 'loves', draws attention to this new sense of self as just one fold of the manifold, ultimately unknowable, other: an exquisite release, which is inferred in the approximate feminine rhyme: 'At ease/peace'.

This sense of mortality radically changes the scale of events, and in some ways human life is accelerated into the shocking compression and apparent insignificance of the life of a fly: in a world where warfare uses the rhetoric of freedom to drive capital, McKimmie gives new meaning to Gloucester's 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport' (Shakespeare 1986: 1086). The first sonnet of the second sequence 'The Brokenness Sonnets II', 'A Life in a Day of a Fly: *America, Afghanistan, Iraq et al*'begins:

> O what a rush!! Twenty-four hours (from
> maggot mute to backspin buzz) of litter. (29)

The major sequence 'Apoplectic' begins with the *Diagnosis* pronouncing a parody of Genesis. This is not *The Gospel According to St John* but according to the doctor-gods. This sequence of four sonnets is interspersed with free verse poems of irregular length and bound together by images of demented arachnid weaving: the warp and weft of language in which the poet's post-diagnosis persona is caught. These are the mock gods, the 'Spider Imperator' masters of fate who make glib pronouncements from bed to bed. In this travesty of 'rebirth', the foetal takes fatal anti-form; just as Diagnosis, far from the living God-made-Word, is received as a death-dealing anti-language.

With such a poet one has to refuse facile, aesthetic responses where lexical poverty *looks* like aphasia itself; here the manifold repetition of 'Diagnosis' works to parody the perverse tautological entrapment of diagnosis: *You are experiencing this because you are a stroke victim*. *We pronounce you a stroke victim because you are experiencing this.*

Not 'In the beginning was the Word' but rather, *In the beginning was the loss of the Word...* And the self is spoken by the other only as a constellation of symptoms. Diagnosis points to one's onset of perhaps definitive languagelessness, casting the whole universe as a Hospital in which foetally, perhaps fatally, the victim is trapped.

> *In the beginning was the Diagnosis*
> *and the Diagnosis was in Hospital*
> *and the Diagnosis was Hospital.*
> *The same was in the beginning with Hospital.*
> *All language was made by the Diagnosis;*
> *and without the Diagnosis was not*
> *any language made that was made.*
> *In it was Prose; and this Prose was the*
> *darkness of men...* (30)

The starvation for active language is performed effectively by the claustrophobic repetition: of 'Diagnosis' and 'Hospital', their capitalisation suggesting monstrous agency and its objectification of the inert 'patient'. The fall-out of the 'third stroke' builds the bars of this language-prison through which medicine pronounces one's own exit from the living word and world.

Here the slight awkwardness actually registers the crushing limitation of diagnosis replacing the world:

> But waking here,
> this shock your shock now is more. (31)

Then nurse and night transmogrify; a perverse maternal occurs:

> Dressed in white icing, warm as a cookie,
> the night-nurse is baked somewhere in
> Hospital.
> But the night, not the night-nurse lactates for
> this litter of the still, stillborn, and still to be
> born,
> each of us foetally, perhaps fatally, paused
> in the midst of a sentence, a day, a dilemma,
> punctuation marks waiting on a writer, on
> Time. (31)

And here comes the play of punctuation: these are *punctuated* rather than *articulating* beings: is this a comma-like pause marking one's fatal line, or a final full-stop, period?

> And after three strokes, I am an ellipsis
> between
> known and unknown — void, blank page,
> poem
> murmuring at the night's breast. 'Will I
> return?... (31)

And the 'I' is emergent in the imagined mirror-self breaking the spell of paralysis; 'I' is the subject of the future writing, already nurturing the silent and helpless recipient of the brilliantly invoked 'venom-sac like a zeppelin':

> Your words here, anger, rage, —
> scratching on the future page.
> Faith as pure verb,
> action taken without faith,
> light in darkness before light arrives
> to reveal the image in tomorrow's mirror:
> no longer paralysed, one way or the other...
> & you were not alone.
> When the venom-sac like a zeppelin
> swung over you at night
> spinning you mute & into its word-web
> I was there. (32-33)

From the allegory of Hospital as 'the great spider, mother[ing] us all / Deaf and blind and spinning in the dark', we move to another ambivalent animal totem, at once agent of condemnation and salvation, the crow, whose myriad incarnations and the radical contextual and tonal shifts they effect, give dynamism and continuity at once to the major sonnet sequence, 'The Tao of Smoking'. This kind of work on the signifier, in which 'crow' can become anything, is integral to the liberatory ethics of this book: like Wallace Steven's 'blackbird' (Stevens 1983: 932-34), the crow can become endlessly other. If 'crow' is the totem, its serial becomings are effected through the idea of the cigarette as stolen breath,

and of ventriloquy as stolen voice. This is an unlikely and fragile affiliation of the thing and its travesty, and yet it works fascinating ironies.

> ...Cigarette after cigarette,
> decree after decree, nothing can save
> the ventroquist's chatterbox dummy
>
> from the implications of silence. (35)

And likewise, 'crow' is a signifier despatched through the sequence to become other than this associated fatality: a measure of metamorphic power through the cliché wrung out until it breaks the brittle shell of catachresis, becoming active, edgy metaphor. This is how to write one's way out of 'Un', out of '*Mal*ediction':

> If I lay end to end all the cigarettes
>
> that I have ever smoked
> [...]
> I will in doing so walk 20 kilometres,
> which in the city of my questionable birth
> gets me to the hospital of my questionable
>
> deaths; then to the cemetery and my
> grandfather's tombstone, on which the crow,
> first sharpened its beach, inscribing
>
> the name of my questionable christening... (35)

The sequence shows cigarettes as endless substitutions, for the mother's nipple [3], for example, but they are also susceptible to become Crow, to become Christ, the principle of breath and of sacrifice in the rhythm of inhalation-exhalation / inspiration-expiration. Smoking, as with Verlaine and Mallarmé [4], is reclaimed as emblematic of poetic transformation. Sometimes the nipple that nourishes is anything but a nipple; and all in the crucible of the poem is transmutable. And defiantly, McKimmie demonstrates here, in his pun on his own given name: no christening need remain a *mal*ediction.

> *Smoking and non-smoking are the same*
> *but diverge in name as they issue forth.*
> *Being the same a cigarette is called a mystery;*
> *but a breath mystery upon mystery,*
> *gateway of the manifold secrets.*
>
> *This is the Tao of smoking.* (35)

Thus are reclaimed the mystery and the force that blow through the cigarette, through one's own name and through the blue-black crow: Mal's diction becomes a benediction, with the *Tao* returning to a version of the Gospel, in a way.

This progression reveals what for me is the secret architecture of this book: the next sequences are animate with a kind of religious ardour as well as playful interrogation. In the title 'Lapsed Corona', as in Donne's 'La Corona: Holy Sonnets' (Donne 1965: 246-48), there is evidently the sense of the solar aura, of the halo of saintliness, and even the glowing tip of a cigar. While these motifs are progressively intensified, the corona also

lends itself to incarnation as a taking-on-of-the-wound, and at last becomes the crown of Christ's death-struck tree.

Here the principle of relay and of ventriloquised repetition from one speaker to the next invades the body of these sonnets, and in addition, as it does in Donne's sequence, the last line of each sonnet is reprised in the first of the next, as in liturgical ceremony. The body of some of McKimmie's 'Lapsed Corona' sonnets is divided dialogically between two speakers, so that in the second sonnet, 'Childhood', the voices of Mary and Joseph alternate, the last line being recovered by Jesus in the third sonnet, 'Temple'. The spirit of the Tao involves dreaming at once of our mortal end as insignificant as the 'backspin buzz' of a fly, and our spiritual dimensions scaled down like angels comically spinning on a scholastic's pin. Just as the sequence declares in topic and form its debt to John Donne, it also manifests, in its play of levity with gravity, a strong kinship with the spiralling paradoxes of the seventeenth century poet's religious meditations.

'Mary' of the sixth sonnet 'Station' ends with the superb lines:

> Oh living ear of God, before closing
> hear me — behind the seen weeps the unseen.
> The altar is laid and the church is clean. (45)

The last of this sequence, the seventh, 'Crucifixion' is both reverent and irreverent as was Christ's radical doubt at this last hour:

> ...To claim
> me back, a vast heart beats its wings unseen
> upon a shore in vain. I will be eaten
> now as a child is by its given name,
> my death will be planted by men in Time,
> a tree will die from the crown down.
>
> Ocean
> I have sung drop by drop into the sky
> sing me home. (45)

Here the sense of the holy is regained breath-by-breath through a decree of iconoclasm and near-blasphemy; the wound is again wounded and the mortal God pulses in the winged heart of the stroke survivor. Time is breath's count as the poem's rhythmic being, but Time is also breath's ironic death-dealer.

'Brokenness Sonnets III' opens with 'The Judas Tree' sequence with epigraphic quotes juxtaposing the lines of Trumball Stickney '... within me t'is as if / The green and climbing eyesight of eyesight of a cat / Crawled near my mind's poor birds' with the assertion from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, that 'all is the Divine Mother — even the [temple] cat' (54). In this sequence, just like the crow of 'The Tao of Cigarettes' the suicide implicit in the image of the Judas Tree unfolds its many incarnations: suicide as despair, but also as positive abdication of self, suicide as being gathered into the manifold narrative of creation. Here again eastern spirituality meets western spirituality and the ironies overlap resonantly. If the temple cats and rats are all part of holy consciousness as are the temple pillars and offerings of food, so are Judas' betrayal and suicide essential to the Christian God's taking on the wound with the flesh. Sri Ramakrishna's cat is perched up there in the Judas Tree with the Cheshire Cat's grin:

Sri Ramakrishnan
was soul-mad for me
& would rather have plunged
a sword into

his own breast (& swung
from the tree) than live
without me... While this
man wakes in the wreck

of his life, the cat
that Ramakrishnan
fed sleeps Cheshire &

replete up in the
Judas Tree & I
am that smiling cat. (54)

Of course the Cheshire has the last laugh, as it were, its smile persisting after its own erasure; and there is also a lovely joke on the poet's own self-survival, beyond death's rehearsals that were the three strokes.

Several of the 'Other Poems' included here beyond the 'Brokenness' sequences weave variations on the major themes of cataclysmic accident, suicide, survival and connectedness; they also consider in a philosophical vein the flipping of fact to metaphor, of homeopathy itself as a kind of cure via metaphor, thus extending the exploration of poetry as a singing out of aphasia. The aphoristic brilliance of the fragment:

'This is Lazarus.
I need an outside line.' (72)

works as a kind of synecdoche for the marvellous life-embracing achievement of Mal McKimmie's collection. Lazarus here has not found a single 'outside line' but has triumphantly found manifold 'outside lines' of high resonance, daringly imaged, intellectually and emotionally transporting, and often blackly funny. But it is especially the way he has allowed his harrowing near-loss of self to register in the sonnet form, through his lineation and orchestration of silence, through the dynamics of enjambment and the strategic deployment of near homophonic chains, that plunges us to the 'speechless centre of [the] wound' around which the 'carnival of Un' does its devastating work. Five Islands Press is to be congratulated for making available through its handsome book design this boldly original and revelatory work.

Notes

1. The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 9 December 2011 return to text

2. Reminiscent of Donne's line from 'Annunciation': 'Thou hast light in dark; and shutt'st in little room, / *Immensity cloiseter'd in thy dear womb.'* 'La Corona: Holy Sonnets' (Donne 1965: 246) return to text

3. McKimmie cites this reference in the epigraph from Robert Hass: *'He wanted to get out of his head,' she said, / 'so I told him to write about his mother's nipples.' The Brokenness Sonnets I-III*, 34 return to text

4. For example ‘Toute l’âme résumée / Quand lente nous l’expirons / Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée / Abolis en autres ronds // Atteste quelque cigare / Brûlant savamment pour peu / Que la cendre se sépare/ De son clair baiser de feu…’ (Mallarmé 1945: 73) [The whole soul summed up / When slowly we expire / In several rings of smoke / Dissolved in further rings // Testifies to some cigar / Burning knowingly / As long as smoke comes free / From its bright kiss of fire...] return to text

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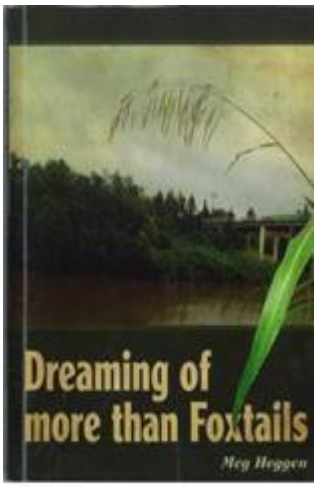
TEXT review

Imagining Reconciliation

review by Moya Costello



Meg Heggen
Dreaming of More Than Foxtails
Meg Heggen, Lismore, NSW 2011
ISBN 9780646551982
Pb 146pp AUD25 (original price, now try Amazon)

The subtitle for this work of creative nonfiction is *A Melancholic Narrative Negotiating the Antipodean Experience of Settlement in Lismore NSW*. Lismore sits within the far-north coastal rainforest area of Australia's New South Wales (NSW), known as the Northern Rivers, which is part of the country of the traditional owners, the Bundjalung nation. As Heggen describes it, the consistent heavy rains flow from the Nightcap Range onto the hills of various surrounding villages such as Federal, and then further down onto Nimbin and elsewhere, including Lismore.

Heggen's book could be usefully read alongside two books that cover the same geographical area, and historical period, from white invasion to the present: Rob Garbutt's *The Locals*, published by Peter Lang in 2011, and Jennifer Hoff's *Bundjalung Junjun: Bundjalung Country*, published by Richmond River Historical Society in 2006, a book that Heggen draws on. Heggen goes from Port Jackson in the late eighteenth century to Lismore in the mid-nineteenth and onwards, from its rivers to its forests and floods, birds, vegetation and vegetables, and from sickness and reservation to potential reconciliation.

Dreaming of More Than Foxtails, a work by a 'whitefella', a term often repeated throughout the book by Heggen, captures the *zeitgeist* – the passionate and sincere need of many Australians to redress the history of race relations in this country through personal action.

Heggen is a former student of the local Southern Cross University, and a resident of the Northern Rivers since 1980. In the book, she knowingly and lovingly details the history and contemporary state of landmarks in Lismore. As a current resident in the Northern Rivers, I am particularly taken with texts about the history – social, cultural and geographical – of this place where I now find myself. Local river, street, infrastructure and government utility names come alive on the pages of Heggen's book: Wilson, Girard, Fawcett and Rous.

Lismore's Wilson and Leycester creeks historically swell the Richmond River in high rainfall and in turn flood Lismore. In this landscape of rivers, there are many causeways and bridges. In Lismore's CBD area, the creeks are crossed by the Coleman and Fawcett bridges, which form, ironically, 'a boomerang' overlooking 'the juncture of the waters' (109). Heggen uses 'bridge' as a metaphor for the potential reconciliation of blackfellas and whitefellas. But at present, as Heggen describes it, beneath the bridges and near the creeks are places for the local Indigenous peoples to camp, and for anyone who is homeless to sleep.

An image of Johnson grass sways across the book's cover. It's the invasive species, *Sorghum halepense*,which successfully competes with the native species, Swamp Foxtail Grass, *Pennisetum alopecuroides.* It is a shame that the beautifully delicate Australian native does not grace the cover as it does the book's title. For Heggen's book is a whitefella dreaming of the (sup)planting of Indigeneity. But the image of Johnson grass may be used ironically, referencing dispossession and invasion.

This is a self-published book, and self-publishing increasingly characterises the contemporary arts, music perhaps most noticeably. Despite the courage and energy revealed in this act of self-publishing, the book does also reveal lack in relation to the collaborative skills associated with trade publishing. In layout it appears to be switching inexplicably (without any readily discernible pattern or consistent reasoning) in font, font style and margins. This undermines legibility and disrupts reading flow. Perhaps that's its purpose though: to perform unsettlement and, perhaps also, to perform in the layout, in mimesis, the practice of song cycles.

The text also needs editing. Heggen is in love with the long, complex sentence, but to the detriment of readability, clarity and impact. Of the many examples of this, here is just one:

> We must bridge the gap if there is to be any chance for the realisation of meaningful public rhetoric around issues of reconciliation with those who declare they are made by the "billing" and the "wamankan"; those who take warning – and act accordingly – with the replies of the "mirram" rather than taking notice of the utterances of white youth who smatter graffiti over metal, timber and concrete, or twitter textual messages on iPods, iPhones or Blackberries across a widening digital divide; or even the empty words of politicians spoken with fear and anxiety in case their admissions give rise to more perceived failures in negotiating anything more than a *pleasant state of co-existence* while endeavouring to share the country/kuntri between those with apparently disparate interests. (113)

By the time we get to ‘politicians’, we’ve forgotten what the original premise of the sentence is. Although ‘between’ goes with ‘bridge the gap’, by the end of the sentence we have at least three if not four parties specified – in which case, ‘among’ would be better suited. ‘More’ is doubled awkwardly. The single sentence needs to be divided into three or four: separate descriptions of what is to be done, by whom and how would make a powerful impact. At the moment, that power is dissipated in confusion. You might look back at how you had to make your way through this text as the timber workers in the cedar industry might have made their way through the dense, dark and wet rainforest of the Big Scrub which once, filled with red cedar, spread from Byron Bay to Lismore.

This is a richly researched book, and Heggen is clearly enamoured of reading and research. But, again, editorial work could have cleared out unnecessary approaches to referencing while not sacrificing actual references. The following appear often: ‘according to [name]’, ‘as [name] relates’, ‘both [name] in [book title] and [name] in [book title]’, ‘as [name] writes’, and so on. These act as interruptions in the text; they are all you begin to notice; the actual thesis of the text gets lost. This is also a book that would have benefited from an index (there are abundant footnotes). But I am conscious of the work and added page numbers, and hence cost, that would result from such an inclusion.

Hopefully, we will look back at this moment to see a range of writers, Heggen among them, in what we might recognise as a groundswell of activity, the aim of which was to fill the culture with a rewriting of history, a revisioning of race relations, and a remaking of place.

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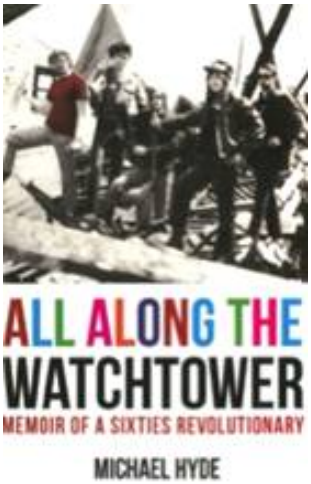
TEXT review

Telling all

review by Emily Sutherland



Michael Hyde
All Along the Watchtower: Memoir of a Sixties Revolutionary
The Vulgar Press, Carlton North, Vic 2010
ISBN 9780980665174
Pb 272pp AUD32.95

During the latter half of the 1960s, Melbourne was subject to political and social unrest. It was the time when Ronald Ryan was hanged at Pentridge Gaol, the last person to be executed before the death penalty was finally abolished, and when the opposition to Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam, as an ally of the United States, grew in strength and ferocity. Those who opposed the war ranged from peace activists to those who advocated more violent methods of protest, extending to not only withdrawing Australian troops but also to overthrowing capitalism and imperialism as practised by the major Western powers. Into that mix can be thrown the movement against the discrimination suffered by Indigenous Australians, and the volatile anti-communism of many of the post-World War II refugees. The feminist movement strengthened during the sixties. Sleepy, staid Melbourne stirred and flexed her political muscles. It was to this Melbourne that Michael Hyde returned from the US, where he had already been involved as a teenager in protest movements and peace activism: '[I] roamed free and wild: I travelled everywhere from San Francisco's Berkeley University, to see its Free Speech movement led by Mario Savio, to the poverty and refried beans of Mexico, where I soon learned all the negative, imperialist connotations of the word "gringo"' (13-14).

All Along the Watchtower is also the title of a protest song by Bob Dylan, written in 1967. For Dylan, there was a deliberate Biblical reference to

Isaiah (21.8): 'Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day'. The Old Testament allusion would not have escaped Hyde, growing up as he did in a religious household. His father was a Methodist minister appointed to a church in Pasadena, California, where the family lived for a time. Returning to Australia to study at Monash University, Hyde wandered about during orientation week feeling lonely and lost until he found the Labor Club festooned with posters of Marx, Ho Chi Minh, Chairman Mao and Che Guevara. Also there was a small dark-haired woman exhorting students to join the movement and overthrow capitalism, an invitation he felt unable to refuse. Signing up, he began a period in his life when he was not only part of the movement protesting against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War but was also to become, along with Albert Langer and Darce Cassidy, part of what Windschuttle designated as an ubiquitous trio of leading protesters (Windschuttle 2005: 25). Eventually, Hyde was invited to join the Maoists, who were, according to the socialist Mick Armstrong, obsessed with police violence and state oppression (Young 2001). The membership of the Maoists was a closely guarded secret, but its political base was reputed to be the Monash University Labor Club, which the young Hyde had joined in 1967.

All Along the Watchtower can be read in three ways: firstly, as an historical account of a protest movement; secondly, as a Bildungsroman, an account of a young man developing from a naïve non-drinking, sexually inexperienced and idealistic teenager to a battle-hardened political activist who experienced arrest, police intimidation and who, throughout this journey, also experienced all he could in the way of sex, drugs and rock and roll; and finally, as a combination of these two.

Some readers may feel that the point of looking back on important events after a period of many decades is surely to review and reflect on them with the benefit of maturity and hindsight. Such reflection is not part of Hyde's account. While Hyde gives a vivid account of his activities – pasting posters on walls, addressing student groups, collecting funds for the NLF and travelling during 1968, first to China where he observed communism and the Cultural Revolution firsthand, then to Cambodia, where he met Wilfred Burchett – his recollections and reflections remain firmly in the time that they occurred. He seems to accept that the Cultural Revolution in China, which began in 1967 and continued for another nine years, was a great movement to alleviate the suffering of the downtrodden and the workers, while admitting that he heard one story too many of their struggles. There appears to be no awareness of the suffering imposed on academics and professional people, or the famine experienced in China as a result of maladministration. He may have, as did many, objected strongly to the Australian government's support of the corrupt South Vietnamese regime, but there is no acknowledgement of the reprisals, the re-education camps for dissidents and the discrimination against those who fought on the opposing side, which characterised the Vietnam government after the end of the Vietnam War. There is no questioning of communism after Soviet Russia sent in tanks and troops to put down the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian uprisings, events that caused a crisis in the Communist Party in Australia at that time. At the end of the book, the author does question whether it was worth it. He describes the toll on the protesters, in terms of personal tragedies, including two suicides, broken careers, terms in jail and shattered relationships. To answer, he writes: 'From my perspective, everything I've been telling you about was all worth it…. Today I see many aspects of our society that have their roots on what we fought for during the sixties and what many from those days still fight for. I can see it in our music, literature, art, theatre and films, schools and

universities' (271). This assessment might serve as a starting point for others to reflect on and reappraise the protest movement in the sixties. Hyde concludes: 'I can see it on the smallest and largest scale, in homes and at work, in the anti-war and environmental movements, in community groups – even in the way society thinks, discusses, argues and tells stories' (271-72). I wish that he had expanded on this.

Considering the book as the account of a young man's rite of passage, there is a certain self-consciousness in the writing. Personal issues are given the same weight as political ideals: 'In the midst of all this furore and euphoria, my status as a virgin hung around like smoke from a campfire' (41). Hyde's subsequent deflowering came as a relief not only to him but also to those with whom he shared a house. Heavy drinking, drugs and group sex follow in a frenzied avalanche, although political activities were his main focus. His relationship with his family, who were sympathetic but less active, is an interesting one. The more involved he became and the stronger the anti-war movement grew, the more his pacifist family supported him. This was not a case of a young man turning his back completely on his childhood, but of him bringing his family into the fight. Surviving an expulsion from Monash University because of his activism and eventual reinstatement, he completed his degree and then became a teacher, was married and raised a family. During his time as an assistant teacher, he faced a different reality when a student claimed he knew nothing of their lives: 'It almost made me cry, because it was true. I stood for the oppressed, the poor and the exploited but my experience and that of many other student left-wingers were light years away from these kids – their homes, their parents' jobs, their opportunities and their dealings with the cops' (175).

Hyde now lectures in writing and literature at Victoria University, Melbourne. He has published both non-fiction and fiction, including novels for young people. An earlier book, *Hey Joe*, whichdrew on interviews with Vietnam veterans, was a precursor to this memoir.

All Along the Watchtower holds the reader's interest, mine especially as I lived in Melbourne through that period and was part of the protests against the Vietnam War, albeit in a far less confrontational role. The narrative never flags, giving a sense of urgency and adrenaline inducing events. It highlights the questioning and flouting of previously accepted mores and standards. Hyde is correct when he states that his story should be told, and it may even jolt people from their political apathy and unquestioning acceptance of government policies.

Works cited

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TEXT review

Offsetting the *mise en abyme*

review by Victoria Reeve

Laura Parker and Jacalyn Sinnett (eds)
Samuek Ryan and Alexandra Schleibs (managing eds)
Offset No. 11
Offset Press, Melbourne, Vic 2011
ISBN 9780646563091
Pb 139pp AUD20

Offset is a creative journal produced annually by students of Victoria University's Professional Writing, Communication and Multimedia program. Its eleventh iteration comprises a beautifully presented volume of poetry, prose, music, multimedia and printed images. The diversity of form makes it somewhat difficult to review, deserving as it does expertise across a range of media. That said, it's easy enough to enjoy *Offset No. 11*: a book format with CD and DVD tucked within its covers makes it something to get excited about. The cover illustration by Martin Power is quaintly appropriate – the detail of the work, particularly that of the back cover, matches the bizarre narrative element at work in the stories and poetry that fill the printed portion of this journal: flip it over and a visual narrative unfolds in the clues as to what took place and where – just when the bear lost its head, so to speak.

In terms of the printed matter, there is no stated theme to the journal and yet the contents sit together very comfortably and in a way that urges the reader on to one more story or poem, and then another, and another. I found myself picking *Offset* up and reading a poem or story at intervals, so it provided the perfect antidote to reader's block (that form of procrastination where you can't face reading what you know you will ultimately enjoy). Even reading in this way, rather than in one sitting, it is possible to take in the subtleties of writing that deals with a range of human sorrows. If about anything in particular, *Offset No. 11* offers an indirect and diverse reading of human feeling ranging from acute anxiety and despair to that form of humorous sadness Shakespeare called melancholy. And I say that it does so indirectly because it seems to glance at its affective object rather than stare it down. This quality is what makes

Offset so readable. Its depths are demonstrated by curiosity rather than clarity. This is not to say that the subject matter is light – some shocking scenarios are portrayed, but in a way that induces a kind of complacent curiosity in the reader.

Perhaps this is because the genres that are invoked, if they can be trusted, promise to lead the reader to a safely fanciful conclusion. Yet the stories develop ambiguities that enable a denouement that is paradoxically anticipated but not necessarily expected, and they do so by maintaining a literal course whilst projecting a sense of aesthetic exaggeration consistent with the range of genres utilised – fantasy, horror and psychological drama, to name a few. The result as often as not is that what seems metaphorical becomes real. 'Monsters', by Erin Meadows, for example, builds its horrific scenario so cunningly that one is tempted to read this narrative as the distorted nostalgia of a painful childhood, until it becomes impossible to remain so comfortably complacent. 'White', by Jade Bitomsky, casts a similar spell by inviting suspicion of the narrator's state of mind through her focused attention on blood and pain and the contrasting purity and sterility suggested by the objects that fascinate her. The distinction here seems to serve as a means for the narrator to exaggerate her despair, suggesting an interior state (of mind) rather than an external reality. Yet this psychological horror story leaves no doubt that the events described must be taken as given.

Not every narrative derives from the fantastic. Some offer a strenuous realism that is softened by the subtlety of the prose. Here, the difficulties of life that each piece describes are explored rather than recounted. Perhaps the prose pieces that most demonstrate this quality are G Raymond Leavold's 'Stationary', Lucia Nardo's 'Exit from the Roundabout' and Sarah Ali's 'Red'. There is only the odd misstep, and there are many other excellent examples, such as Oliver Mol's 'Letter to Yarra Trams', but it is not possible to do all of them justice here.

The poetry is spread across the journal, and along with the images this produces a comfortable reading pace. To single out a few: Lunabella Mrozik Gawler's 'Turn On, Log In, Drop Out' is a witty expression of virtual life, Emily Manger's 'The Sweaty Tango' addresses a similar crisis, and Teri Louise Kelly's 'The Cracks' shifts from these concerns to a more apocalyptic vision.

The CD has eight tracks. The music is nicely produced, eclectic but with a unified quality that might be described as global fusion. It is both interesting and easy to listen to without being 'easy listening'. As a compilation of works by different artists, the tracks represent a variety of styles, and yet each song introduces a rhythmical or tonal quality that contributes to the pleasing shape of the music overall. The instrumentals are interspersed amidst vocal tracks that are very different to one another, providing interludes that overcome any disparities of vocal style. Some highlights are the haunting quality of Mushroom Horse's 'Home of the Herder' and 'Messenger' by Lorraine Anne. While Anne misses pitch in the vocalese, her performance is otherwise excellent and her voice has the perfect quality for this style of song, whose length (over nine minutes) gives the listener time to take in its stylistic shifts.

There are four documentaries and one short film on the DVD. Apart from 'A.P.E. Media Interview', the documentaries and film are united by a common theme, that of identity and, in the case of the documentaries, the real journeys taken toward the experience of being at home in

geographical and personal terms. Among these, 'Calling Australia Home' presents two very different experiences, its strength being the articulate and insightful accounts supplied by its two interviewees. The only fictional piece, 'Mighty Paella Woman', is an entertaining animated film that uses a pleasing array of representational techniques. That said, some viewers may find the moral of fighting violence with violence problematic, even if it is ironic in some sense, given the rather beguiling humour with which the narrative proceeds.

Overall, the documentaries are interesting and informative. Their titles might have been a little more imaginative and, in some instances, more politically savvy, in the latter sense by choosing to break away from terms like 'new Australian', which is complexly 'othering', and (in the case of the documentary described above) by avoiding the intertextual connotations that link to that well-known sentimental patriotic song by Peter Allen. Allen's championing of the middle-class ideal of international life and perpetual tourism – an opportunity not immediately available to those Australians who arrived as refugees and who are less likely to acquire the financial freedom to experience the ease of travel that Allen celebrates – reminds me of Australians' less-than-glowing reputation these days as self-centred hedonistic tourists.

The artwork complements the printed aspect of the journal by introducing a visual element that crosses over to the multimedia. Some of the works are less accomplished, but others introduce fascinating obscurities, adding to the ironic effect of the literal dressed as metaphor, which characterises some of the short stories described earlier. I include Martin Power's work among these, but Jessica Couchi's 'Endless' would have to be the most conceptually rich in this particular vein, for it seems to reproduce the spiral binding of a book within a book: the scene – a blue sea fringed by a vertical row of balconies suspended over its endless expanse. Whether intended or not, this *mise en abyme* is emblematic of *Offset No. 11*, with the promise of multiple textual pleasures nestled between its covers. The journal's headliners – Kate Holden and π.o – provide some interesting material, but the strength of this publication lies in the new voices, artists and perspectives that it offers.

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