

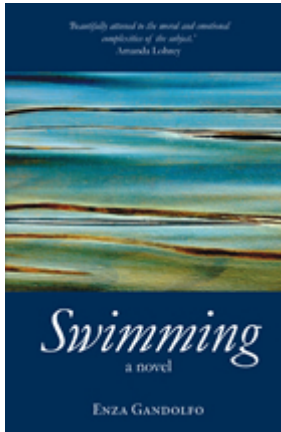
Reviews contents

- Enza Gandolfo *Swimming*
review by Sue Bond page 2
- Marcelle Freiman *White Lines (Vertical)*
review by Kevin Brophy page 5
- Kate Lilley (ed) *Southerly – The Poetry Issue*
review by Steve Evans page 8
- Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady (eds) *The Chunes Little Book of the Book* review
by Helen Gildfind page 11
- Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French and Ned Stuckey *Writing Fiction: A
Guide to Narrative Craft*
review by Angelina Mirabito page 14
- Sandra Newman and Howard Mittelmark *How not to write a novel*
review by Gail E Pittaway page 16
- P.D. James *Talking About Detective Fiction*
review by Jay Daniel Thompson page 19
- Graeme Harper *On Creative Writing*
review by John Weldon page 22

TEXT review

Swimming for her life

review by Sue Bond



Enza Gandolfo
Swimming
Vanark Press 2009
ISBN 978-0-9803500-2-9
pb 330pp AUD29.95

Kate Wilks is a swimmer; she moves far more easily in the water than she does on land, and she has been swimming all her life. The symbol of water is all through this first novel by Enza Gandolfo, and makes for a flowing feel, the words sometimes drifting, sometimes whirlpooling, sometimes rushing, crashing, or still.

But Kate, now near sixty, meets up with her ex-husband, the sculptor Tom, at a photography exhibition. Kate is the subject of one of the photographs, naked and standing in the sea; the photographer is her best friend Lynne's daughter, Tess, both mother and daughter are very important in Kate's life. But Tom unexpectedly asks her 'Do you think...we might have stayed together if we'd had children?' (11).

And this question becomes the impetus for Kate to go back into her memories of trying to have a baby. She digs out an unfinished manuscript called 'Writing Sarah', a collection of fragments and chapters that describes her thoughts and feelings as she fell pregnant, only to miscarry each time. The core of the book is Kate's exploration of what it means to be childless, to want a baby so badly that you give her a name and imagine her so clearly that she almost becomes real. Almost, but not quite.

There are other stories contained within this one, too, such as that of Kate's parents, who she remembers as fighting a lot, her friend Lynne, who now has early onset Alzheimer's disease, and Tom's second wife Mai, whose family came to Australia from Vietnam and suffered the deaths of two daughters. Mai comes to live with Kate and Tom after being thrown

out of home by her brother, and Tom and she fall in love, a betrayal that is particularly painful for Kate especially when Mai becomes pregnant.

Gandolfo writes lyrical passages that connect with the emotions and bodily changes of her character. Kate's older self, as portrayed in the photograph, is neatly described: 'I'm both myself and someone else—Venus, the ancient goddess emerging from the ocean depths; and a plainish older woman bathing in the sunshine' (6). The author manages to show the multiple views of women in a society such as ours without making it laboured: the young male journalist interviewing Kate at the exhibition; the doctors' assumption that Kate will go on to IVF; the Vietnamese community's shunning of Mai when she is sexually harassed by a Vietnamese man; Kate's mother and aunt talking only of women who eventually became mothers, never of those who remained childless; the very word 'childless' itself, connotating as it does that a woman is 'less' something if she doesn't have children. And Kate's searing, repeated losses, resulting in a deep, lasting grief. She questions what her life means, and what she is worth, surrounded by people with children who ask her why she has no children herself.

Gandolfo is particularly good at depicting grief, with sentences like 'For two weeks her womb has been a coffin' (122), and Kate feeling her body as a 'hostile landscape' (214) unable to sustain a baby. When Kate is thinking of her father's death, she remembers her mother saying:

When I open the wardrobe doors and I see his clothes,
Mum said, 'for a moment he's alive. Maybe in the garden
or at the pub and I think of things to say to him, stuff I want
to tell him. And for that moment I am not alone. (223)

The novel is also about Kate's survival, despite her loss and grief: she is now a successful writer, and lives with (ten years younger) George, who is wise, sexy and interesting. Others who did have children do not always fare so well: Mai dies young and Lynne loses her memory. This is, it seems to me, a reminder that having children is not a talisman against sadness and pain, something that Lynne acerbically reminds Kate after the birth of Tess. The fact Kate has survived is concisely symbolised by a short passage near the end of the book, where she remembers her father lifting up his shirt to visitors to show them his surgical scar: '*I lived through this* was implicit in the act of display' (251). She elaborates:

I'm drawn to this examination of the past as one is drawn to
trace the origin of an old scar, to revisit the pain that came
with the initial wound, secure in the knowledge that I have
survived. (251)

Tom's sculptures, and art and vocation generally, are important in this story. The creation of art is linked to Kate's creation of life through pregnancy, and just as her attempts are thwarted, Tom's work is renewed through his love for Mai. What results is not a surprise, but a symbolic action that both cleanses and appalls Kate. I did feel that the reader is not given enough of Tom to understand his feelings. It seems that, as Kate assumes he doesn't feel much when she miscarries, that we are not meant to believe he does either. Perhaps more attention to Tom's creative and emotional life might have been enriching.

As a writer I am intrigued by the 'Writing Sarah' manuscript. Kate says of it that it 'is obviously a first draft' and 'requires much restraint not to

attack it with a pen' (104). This made me wonder how, as a reader as well as a writer, I should read these segments? As an actual first draft written by the character of Kate years ago, or as the novelist's finished version of her character's writing? They do not actually read as drafts, of course, but as polished chapters. They are, nevertheless, effective ways to advance Kate's story, despite the incongruity.

The other problem I encountered with the reading of this otherwise sensitive and intelligent novel is that in places it 'drowns' in words. The dynamic feel falls away when Kate is allowed too much rumination, going repeatedly over thoughts until the reader loses interest. There are remembered scenes that do not contribute to the narrative, but weigh it down. A tightening of some of the prose would have injected more energy into it.

But as a woman without children myself, I welcome this beautifully written and engaging novel. There are few imaginative works dealing directly with infertility and childlessness (chosen or otherwise), and this one explores it from various angles and points of view, always with Kate's struggle, and survival, at the centre.

Sue Bond is a freelance writer and reviewer for several publications, as well as book reviews editor for M/C Reviews: Culture and the Media.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

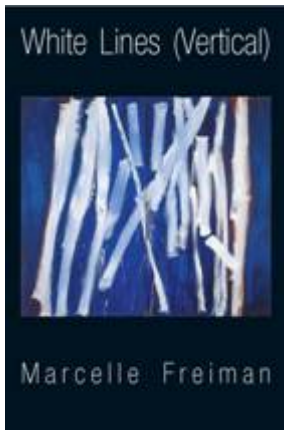
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

White Lines

review by Kevin Brophy



Marcelle Freiman
White Lines (Vertical)
Hybrid Publishers, Vic. 2010
ISBN: 9781876462970
Pb 85pp AUD25

White Lines (Vertical) is Marcelle Freiman's second book of poetry, arriving fifteen years after her first critically acclaimed collection. This is its own enigmatic statement, for it might mean a return to poetry or it might be an assurance that poetry was being written all along, while a successful academic career and the raising of a family took her time and energies. Marcelle Freiman's family was from Lithuania and Latvia, she was raised in South Africa during the height of the Apartheid regime and settled in Australia in 1981. Her poetry has a global reach, and it draws on influences and voices from deep connections with Europe, with colonized nations, and with the history of the twentieth century.

The first poem stands outside the collection as a kind of gate, and in fact its title is 'Gate'. This poem announces a number of preoccupations and poetic strategies that will work their way through the collection. 'Gate' announces that this writer's commitment is to a direct, plain-spoken poetry, which holds details (the otherwise passing and forgotten experiences of a lived life) as metaphors we might look into in order to find what it is we value about being alive. 'Gate' is about (in one sense) that practice of looking out for our feet when we walk across uneven surfaces out there in the world, but it is also about the way paying attention to the world can bring us up against ourselves, 'face to the glass' in a moment 'that stops your tracks'. There is an imagist commitment here, but also the angle of a psychologist who understands that once we do stop in front of ourselves, the self breaks 'in two, in three' until what we knows is only what we have lost. This fragmentation is an aspect of her

own experience of living across three continents and the impacts of historical upheavals of the Holocaust and Apartheid. The fragmentation returns explicitly in the poem 'Masha' (a diminutive of Marcelle) later in the collection. The commitment to imagist values is reiterated in the collection's final poem, where Freiman intensifies William Carlos Williams' famous counsel introducing a red wheelbarrow, by stating in her poem, '*everything* depends upon/the slash diagonal, the crossing —/branching where two parts join'. 'Gate' is a beautiful poem, and a sad poem too; it is a warning to watch for the unevenness, the exposed roots, the stones that might trip us up in the book we are about to read. At least that's the idea I took from this gate — though gates make me think of gardens about to be entered as well. Are we going in or are we going out? Further into the book, in her return to South Africa, there is a low gate to her childhood home, now within a gated suburb, with a waving gardener and watchdogs with 'their melting eyes turned vicious'. A near-final poem in the last pages returns to the theme of this opening by taking us on another walk where we 'tread on brittle insects/with our difficult boots' and yet, as in 'Gate', we are reminded that if we are able to notice it, there comes a 'curving seam/from who knows where — ... bright through bladed grass'. Philosophers call it *qualia*. Thomas Nagel famously called it 'what it is like to be a bat', and poets reach after it in many ways, all of them never quite the final word.

Marcelle Freiman has worked for some years with the poetry group in Sydney called DiVerse, who write poems in response to art works in Australian galleries. There are a number of poems responding to art, including the stunning painting of slashed diagonals by Tony Tuckson on the front cover and a beautiful response to Grace Cossington Smith, with 'trees humming green'. Lyonel Feininger is the first painter whose work is taken up by this ekphrastic impulse. He was a cubist drawn to painting churches and skies with low horizons, a founder of Bauhaus and a victim of the Nazis in the 1930s. The poem is peppered with 's' sounds, and the gas of the Holocaust hangs over it.

The book promises to be weighted by this history, and indeed with the second poem subtitled 'Russia 1992' it would seem that history will be a powerful presence. In fact, though, Freiman's poetry is consistently intimate, personal, driven by sensual and private memories. Stiffening this approach, and saving it from becoming indulgent or sentimental, is the presence of these histories of violence. This Russian poem is a personal history of impressions of European grandparents in a free verse that allows natural phrase boundaries to dictate line lengths. The liveliness of the poetry partly lies in Freiman's feel for producing a variety of phrasing and length of phrases as her sentences build.

Two small early poems are worth the price of the book. One is the poem 'Drawing', which takes up again the theme of 'Gate' but with a more threatening take on the 'raw play/of objects' insatiable for life. It is a fast, passionate poem. The other is 'Furnace', which continues with the idea of rawness, offering us a raw poetry that condenses the horror of Dickens' *Hard Times* and Hitler's assembly-line murder. From here there are two more poems trying to respond to the facts of massacres, leading into 'Masha', a poem that plays with possible female identities, memories of childhood and the impact of the news that her grandmother's extended family had been massacred along with all Jews in the township of Simna in 1941, among them nearly 150 children.

The following sections of the book explore the deep connections Freiman feels with her South African childhood and youth, 'when guilt and white privilege could turn you crazy'. Her evocation of a certain moment in her teenage years is too perfect to leave without quoting:

just tobacco bits
right on your tongue,
this was how to be strong,
wipe them out,
take a man's drag,
show them.
(from 'Smokes')

Again, it is her understanding of detail, and of the way words chime against each other (tongue, strong; man's drag), along with her willingness to be brief that keep her poetry alive for the reader. Her South African mind and South African identity survive her settlement in Australia:

the year our Sydney garden
was shaded by an old oak tree
I rubbed my back against her crusty bark
like an antelope itching with dust
(from 'Oak')

Mostly the poems are concerned with women and women's identities, but there is a small section devoted to her father who ran a factory producing protein foods for the poor in South Africa. Even here it is the wide old woman, Mercy, who cares for him when he is in his nineties in Johannesburg that the reader remembers.

White Lines (Vertical) is a joyously difficult book, it is a pleasurable uncomfortable book. Its poetry aims at all times at accuracy of statement while allowing wholeheartedly for the complexity that makes any single focus insufficient for human meaning. I hope that after this book there will be a flurry of books from Marcelle Freiman, catching us up on the fifteen years we missed from her.

Kevin Brophy is a poet and novelist. He is author of eleven books and coordinates the creative writing program in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

Tasting the range of poetic styles

review by Steve Evans



Southerly – The Poetry Issue

Vol. 69 No. 3

Kate Lilley (ed)

Brandl & Schlesinger, 2010

Pb 240pp Subscribe at Southerly home page

The journal of the English Association of Sydney, *Southerly* normally blends new prose and poetry with essays and reviews. Vol. 69 No. 3 is a special poetry issue edited by Kate Lilley, who says she chose poems that ‘struck me most with their *enargia* (vivid invention) and distinctiveness’. There is no doubt that is true of much of the material, but whether readers will be similarly struck is another matter. Many of the poems resist the use of both straightforward imagery and a linear, cohesive narrative structure, and their novelty does wear off in places.

Not all reading should or can be organised to fit expectations of traditional structures and uses of figurative language, though. The fact of variety in styles here is pleasing, even if some poems are notably more engaging than others. Even as some of these poems jar, deliberately or otherwise, they may remind us of our own default reading modes when we approach a poem, and draw personal habits into question.

In his famous ‘Introduction to Poetry’, Billy Collins refers to student readers of poetry and their tendency to analyse in pursuit of a poem’s distilled essence: ‘I want them to waterski / across the surface of a poem / waving at the author’s name on the shore.’ One might have this in mind when reading Michael Farrell’s four poems, all entitled ‘lyric’, that comprise tangential fragments. The last begins:

It blocks mt fuji.
In the fog you see

a pot & a truck
eggshell feather falling, a sparrow knocks.

Does Farrell mean us to be thinking particularly about *how* we read a poem, or is he asking us to simply surf across the top of it? The lack of linearity and readily integrated content does not necessarily undermine the poem; there is always the skimmed view available from above, and the pleasure of startling conjunctions that function as good metaphors will. Farrell has said in conversation that he sees the process of writing his poetry as being akin to composing hymns. His 'lyric' poems underline the fact that the best instructions for how to read a poem are still contained in the poem itself.

The poems in this issue, then, may be more centred on the voice and suggestion rather than the literal and direct, thus defying analytical pressure. Ken Bolton's long 'Luminous Hum' wanders in a casual epistolary manner that plays with space on the page as if to consciously defy tighter forms. Rosemary Huisman's 'Tesseræ' is a picaresque prose poem, with the emphasis on prose, that presents fragments of small-town characters' lives. It does coalesce; the whole, as they say, clearly being larger than the sum of its parts. Alison Croggon's '*from* Beowulf Unplugged' plays with a time-honoured device, the crudely translated poem. It is prefaced with a note explaining that the poem is based on processing her translation of *Beowulf* 'through a dictation application'. Unfortunately, it turns relatively flat after the first few lines. P O's 'Albert Namatjira', on the other hand, is a witty and exuberant series of observations that settles into a more somber reflection on the artist's life, able to embrace both:

It's against the Law to hypnotize a person, and make them
Stand outside a shop window, like a mannequin.

and:

The Lor-I'tja came to his grave, in a cab
In bare feet
Clutching a small posey of flowers
/
How *does* a song bird fly 2,000 miles?

More conventionally, Geoff Page and Tom Shapcott contemplate the in/significance of human affairs in their separate poems. Page's character is a miner who feels the weight of the worlds above and below ground in the deft 'The Mine: 1953', while in Shapcott's 'Weeding', the narrator is washing hands after a day in the garden:

...outside the weeds are batched in green plastic bags
As if the job has been done. Wait, says the earth,
And we all wait. Nothing stays motionless forever.

There are reviews and essays in *Southerly* too, the latter including John Tranter's 'Dream-work', which is an excerpt from his doctoral exegesis. If one can overlook the curious decision to refer to himself in the third person throughout, this is interesting at least for his assertions about the importance of acknowledging one's influences. Tranter raises the ghost of Ern Malley as emblematic of his own continuing desire to experiment, a restlessness that more poets might find productive for their own work. This might seem an odd comment to make given that some of the more

marginal poetry here is not wholly successful but there is material to reward a reading that favours elision and fracture.

Both the more usual poems and the edgier work in this special poetry issue of *Southerly* have their appeal, though I can't help feeling that Joan Houlihan's provocative essays on the contemporary denaturing of the poem could well have taken some of the latter in this issue as examples. What readers expect in poetry can be suddenly revealed to them when it is denied, when they are confronted with something different and thus more challenging than their usual diet. That process can be strangely exciting, even when discomfiting, and a number of poems in this issue achieve that result.

Southerly is not confined to print. Each issue has supplementary material such as essays, poetry and further reviews that can be found in its companion outlet, 'The Long Paddock', attached to the main website: <http://www.brandl.com.au/southerly/>.

If you want to taste the range of poetic styles in Australia, the country's oldest surviving literary magazine, *Southerly*, may be just the place to go. Be prepared for an eclectic selection.

Steve Evans works at Flinders University and is poetry editor of TEXT.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

Myself, my shelf

review by Helen Gildfind



Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady (eds)

The Clunes Little Book of the Book:

Five Leading Authors Reflect on Their Relationship with the Book

Creative Clunes 2010 (limited edition www.booktown.clunes.org)

Hb 64pp AUD95

This book is the first literary product of the Clunes' annual Back to Booktown Festival. It is a limited edition, made up of five established male writers' reflections upon their private and professional relationship to The Book.

The collection begins with Edgar Allan Poe helping a twelve-year-old Frank Moorhouse befriend a girl he thought was a Naiad, a water-spirit. Soon, Hemingway's short stories transform him into 'the last Full-Time Short Story Writer in Australia' (if not 'the Universe'). By his late thirties, strangled by this commitment to form, a friend pronounces Moorhouse 'a Writer.' Most writers will identify with this moment in Moorhouse's career, where the status of 'writer' occupies such a self-conscious and uneasy position between private and public identification. Later, Boguslavsky's copyright theory shows Moorhouse how published writing is always political. Moorhouse ends his piece with a lament, wishing he'd read Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* before his 'similar agony' of obsessive, unrequited love. Moorhouse's often self-deprecating reflections engage readers in the idea of The Book as an instrument of magic, a cementer of friendships, a political tool, and a teacher on both the craft of writing and the craft of living.

Arnold Zable's piece focuses on books as a means of navigating cultural landscapes. Zable describes the battered Yiddish literature which his father brought to Australia from Poland, texts that allowed Zable to meet the ghosts of annihilated peoples. At his Yiddish language school and the Kadimah library, Zable entered a world of oppositional extremes (epitomised by the title of his first book, *Jewels and Ashes*). Zable

describes how Yiddish books guided him through the ‘ancestral dreaming’ of his family’s homeland. Intuitively, he established his own ‘triumvirate’ practice of writing that involved travelling, reading books about places whilst in those places, and journaling. Books are Zable’s mentors, ‘manuals’ on the art of observation and the art of ‘painting with words.’

Nigel Krauth recalls how childhood stories taught him that fiction ‘deals with the real.’ Whilst his parents found Christianity, Krauth found the sexed-up world of the *Moulin Rouge*. Dreaming of Paris, he wandered Manly in a raincoat built for discrete masturbation and shop lifting. He nicked *Playgirl* and Carter Brown’s sexy detective novels. Krauth describes how, today, his bookshelf is himself with each book mapping past and future identities. His is a ‘harem of books,’ each one a bride that he can ‘enjoy’ anywhere, each offering a tactile experience that no digital e-reader will ever replicate. He ends by describing the diaspora of his books: books stored elsewhere, forgotten, archived; the ‘pre-books’ of manuscripts; the ‘ultrasounds’ of books in progress and the ‘abortions’ of books never completed. Whilst Krauth’s gentle and teasing approach to his younger self is evocative and often funny, his later use of bridal/natal imagery and metaphor doesn’t quite gel, getting in the way of, rather than enabling, his exploration of the deeply intimate nature of reading.

Anthony Lawrence reflects on his difficult childhood in a rural boarding school where the library and the classroom offered him both physical and mental escape. Leonard Cohen and Richard Brautigan became his first paper-mentors, teaching him to live for his imagination. Back in the city, his concerned mother sought ‘help’ from a writers’ centre and he entered the ‘lion’s den of Australian poetry.’ Studying form allowed Lawrence to find the ‘loose thread’ of his own voice, a thread to which he ‘held on tight’ and followed to poetry readings and other poets. Finally, that thread became something he could ‘wear’ and he stepped out into the ‘glorious wreckage’ of his own voice. Like Zable, Lawrence’s books are sources of inspiration and active teachers on the craft of writing.

Stefan Laszczuk’s vibrant, conversational voice describes how his youthful addiction to books transformed into an addiction to drugs, drink, masturbation and writing. He confesses that he doesn’t read as much as or as well as people assume a writer should. He then describes the books that his mother left him, and his reflections effectively become an ode to her: he loves her books because he loves her. Like Krauth, Laszczuk enjoys books as tactile things, objects that can be smelt and touched and that, in his case, conjure his mother back to life. Like all of the writers in this collection, Laszczuk shows how a book is so much more than text: books are relics, places we go to and things we fill our places with; books are teachers, translators and friends; books are parts of our bodies and the bodies of those whom we love.

It would have been useful if the editors of the collection elaborated upon the limits placed on its production. Was there a reason, for example, for focussing on one gender? Whilst there will be an equivalent women’s edition next year, I wonder if thematising by gender risks limiting such books’ audiences, and I wonder if each writer’s distinct voice and experiences would have been positively emphasised by a more diverse context. Also, whilst the book certainly offers its promised ‘broad scope’ of insights, I was left wanting a deeper engagement with each writer’s world and ideas. I especially wanted to know more about the ‘nuts and bolts’ of each authors’ evolving writing practice. Zable and Lawrence touch on this, but it would be interesting, for instance, to know how The

Book helped Moorhouse develop from a short story zealot to a writer of epic-sized novels. Perhaps wanting more is simply a compliment to what is there, and, questions aside, *The Clunes Little Book of the Book* is an elegantly produced collection of thoughtful and distinct voices.

Helen Gildfind has had essays, short stories and poetry published in Island (upcoming), Hecate, Antipodes, Poetrix, Idiom, Veranda, Voiceworks, Westerly, Southerly, and antiTHESIS. She is currently studying literature and creative writing at the University of Melbourne.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

All about the craft

review by Angelina Mirabito



Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French and Ned Stuckey

Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft

Pearson Publication / Longman (eighth edition) 2011

ISBN-10: 0205750346

ISBN-13: 9780205750344

Pb 432pp USD78.40

Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft is an essential read for those committing to the act of creative writing. Assuming nothing this book gives the reader the primary colours of their craft clearly.

It is ideal for first year creative writing students. To begin a writing program having read this would prepare them for the workshopping progress and provide them with an essential understanding of tools available for them to take up while building a writing folio. It is something that can be returned to during one's writing life, both within and outside the academy, as it tells no lies. It also is written with a love for writing which inspires rather than intimidates the reader with the daunting task of making a piece of fiction work. Stripping everything back to basic building blocks of writing, and then supporting it with a fresh selection, Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French and Ned Stuckey have completed an impeccable eighth edition. It's honest, knowing, full of gifts for the writer and an enjoyable read.

While the book is not repetitious, it is full of lessons that need to be learned over and over again with each piece that one writes. Accessible and inspiring it details the potential effects showing and telling, characterisation, place, time, story, point of view, form, plot and structure can give to a piece depending on the ways in which is it manipulated to effect. It also deals sensitively and appropriately with process and

revision. Both of which the writer develops and refines as they learn about themselves as writers. The guide shows there are no hard and fast rules, good or bad, but ways of coming to know and managing what works and doesn't work in the process of writing and the revisions and revisits after a solid draft is written. The writer is given keys for identifying why a piece may not be working or difficult to finish and possible doors to walk through for overcoming such problems. Furthermore it shows how writing groups and feedback can be managed for the best possible outcome.

In all ways *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* is what it claims to be, a narrative guide that respects what is required from a person creating fiction. The fact that it assumes nothing from the reader is its greatest strength, providing the writer with a loyal companion that encourages, inspires and equips its intended reader for what is needed to overcome obstacles, shadows and blank pieces of paper.

Angelina's publications include short stories in Muse, AntiTHESIS, Mascara Literary Review, SLAM Philament, Vibewire Youth Inc., poem in Page Seventeen and articles in VWC Magazine, Double Dialogues and Meanjin (March 2011). Her three hour book was shortlisted for the 2009 Lord Mayor Creative Writing Awards. She is a recipient of the Eleanor Dark Varuna Writing Fellowship and a Rosebank Residency. Angelina is a member of the ongoing Novel Writing Masterclass with Antoni Jach, Creative Writing PhD candidate at Deakin University and sessional tutor at the University of Melbourne. Christos Tsiolkas is currently mentoring Angelina with her novel Disobedience.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

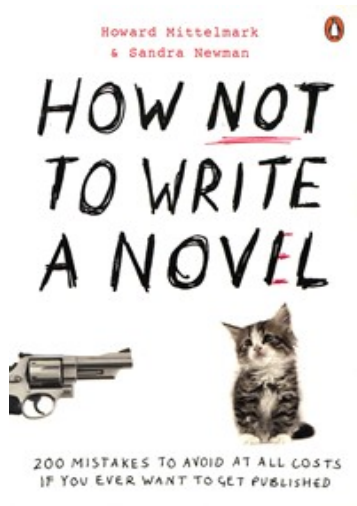
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

A witty checklist

review by Gail E Pittaway



Sandra Newman and Howard Mittelmark

How not to write a novel: 200 mistakes to avoid at all costs if you ever want to get published

Penguin London 2009

ISBN-13: 9780141038544

Pb 272pp AUD26.95

Hysteria, it could be argued, marks a line between hilarity and desperation. This book has moments that provoke hysterical laughter – not only for the would-be novelist, who might realise somewhat shame-faced that she has contravened a now obvious code of practice for publication - but also for the teacher of creative writing for whom most of these acts of commission in writing are an almost weekly torture. Here at last is a witty checklist of those crimes against style we all struggle with, from meandering and meaningless plots or characters, to poorly focused point of view.

Mittelmark and Newman between them bring a great deal of experience of editing, teaching and writing fiction, as well as essays and criticism in an impressive list of publications from the New York Times to Granta. Mittelmarmark is the author of the novel, *“the Age of Consent”*, and Edwards was a finalist for the Guardian First Book Award, with *“The only good thing ever done”* and awaits publication of her memoir, *“Folk Tales of the rich”* from Random House later this year. There is also a *How Not to Write a Novel* website which gives updates on the varied uses of the book in colleges and universities as well as links and chat lines for readers to post example of poor style that they come across.

The two writers present their ideas in an accessible and amusing way by subverting the “How to” genre with their “How Not To” conceit. In the introduction the authors assure us, “employing any of the plot mistakes

that follow will guarantee that your novel will be only a brief detour in a ream of paper's journey to mulch."

The book is slight in size- covering only 200 mistakes after all, at around 260 pages- but it is punchy and clever enough to divert and inform scholarly readers as much as it is sure to improve the content of many a manuscript for a more popular and commercial market with brisk gems such as; "There is never a need to tell your reader that something is ironic...If it is they will notice."

Each section deals with the maltreatment of each element such as plot, character, setting, theme, style and voice. This is reassuringly predictable. However, within each section are spurious scenarios and tawdry exemplars of this language abuse in emboldened text; in the plot chapter, for example, describing such non sequiturs as "The Vatican Side Show (travelogue disguised as a novel) and "Words Fail Me" (exemplified by the coma- inducing introduction: "Now that he had finally reached Paris, Chip understood why it was called the City of Lights. It was the lights.") While the authors must have had fun devising these examples, they are powerful models of what not write and alarmingly familiar to the teacher of writing.

Other categories in the worst plot traditions are Monogamy (there is only one plot line and the characters, including minor characters, react and respond to it alone), Serial Monogamy (where the author presents complications only to solve them immediately- thereby killing suspense) and Onanism (where a single character goes through a series of events with no contact with anyone else).

Of particular interest to scholarly writers are chapters on postmodern writing, endings, character, sexuality, style and research. "Gibberish for art's sake" is particularly recognizable; "where indecipherable lyricism baffles the reader". We are reminded that as writing is a form of communication, writers should try to communicate with their readers, not mystify them.

Each chapter is followed with shaded boxes with summaries and pointers, "The road to the trash heap is paved with good intentions". Some of the shaded sections even have pop quizzes or multi choice tests. With a full index of the 200 mistakes in alphabetical order, "*How not to write a novel*" "is a gift for any teacher of writing, as the advice, exemplars and summaries will be invaluable material for discussion and diversion. As well, any lover of writing or language study will find it an entertaining and easy read.

Gail Pittaway is a senior lecturer in Writing, Drama and Storytelling at the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton. She is the theatre critic for the Waikato Times and regularly reviews new writing on Radio New Zealand, National.

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

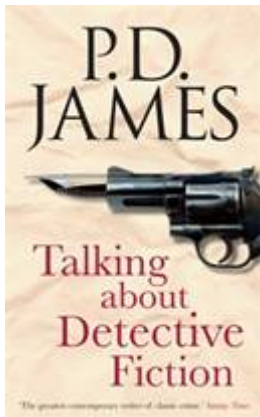
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

Murder, she wrote

review by Jay Daniel Thompson



P.D. James
Talking About Detective Fiction
Faber and Faber, London 2009
ISBN: 978-0-571-25355-5
Pb 159pp AUD26.99

P.D. James is a prolific author of detective novels. In *Talking About Detective Fiction*, the London-based writer provides an analysis of her chosen genre. Her text is very readable, though it contains some distinct limitations.

James begins by exploring the origins of detective fiction in the work of Victorian authors such as Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. There is an extensive discussion of the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction. According to James, this 'Golden Age' spanned the first half of the twentieth century and encompassed the work of Dashiell Hammett and Dorothy Sayers, amongst others (72). James looks at more recent detective fiction, including some of her own novels. The writer concludes by speculating that twenty-first century readers will continue to enjoy the 'relief, entertainment and mild intellectual challenge' that detective narratives offer (157).

James writes in a lively, engaging style and demonstrates a great passion for her subject matter. She admits that detective fiction is her 'favourite relaxation reading' and a genre that she had always wanted to contribute to (124). James makes some intelligent observations about the production and consumption of detective narratives. My favourite of these concerns the importance of a novel's setting:

Setting ... is important to characterisation, since people react to their environment and are influenced by it. When an author describes a room in the victim's house, perhaps the one in which the body is found, the description can tell the perceptive reader a great deal about the victim's character and interests. (115)

The importance of setting can also help explain the prevalence of the quaint English village in the work of authors such as Agatha Christie. According to James, this village setting 'retains a powerful hold on our imagination, an image compounded of nostalgia for a life once experienced or imagined and a vague unfocused longing to escape the city for a simpler ... life' (113). The cosy atmosphere of the mythical English village is disturbed when a murder takes place.

Also, I commend James for defending detective fiction against charges that it glorifies and provokes violence. James argues that 'fictional murder is usually ... more complicated and ingenious than murder in real life' (135). The fictional murderer 'is always found out', and this distinguishes them from many real-life killers (135). James concedes that 'it is possible to deal with the intellectual side of the detection' and also portray 'the emotional trauma' of characters affected by a murder (136). This is more ethically sound (and accurate) than suggesting that murder affects nobody but the victim.

The field of detective fiction is broad. There are (unsurprisingly) aspects of this field that James touches on barely, if at all. She focuses primarily on detective narratives from the UK and US. Those searching for references to Australian crime novelists such as Shane Maloney will be disappointed. James devotes a whole chapter to work of women (for example, Agatha Christie) who have written detective narratives. She cites female sleuths such as Miss Marple and V.I. Warshawski. Puzzlingly, though, James refers to writers and readers of detective fiction using the masculine pronoun.

The main problem with *Talking About Detective Fiction* is that James' research is dated. The author approvingly quotes insights about literature and representation by modernist writers such as W.H. Auden and A. A. Milne. Conversely, she deplores the impact that psychoanalytic literary theory has supposedly had upon contemporary authors and critics: 'For a time in the late twentieth century it seemed that the story was losing its status and that psychological analysis ... (was) taking over from action' (140). This is a broad statement, and one that James does not attempt to support by quoting any purveyors of 'psychological analysis'.

James' text could have benefited from an engagement with recent studies of detective literature and popular fiction. These studies include Sally R. Munt's *Murder By the Book* (1994) and Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logic and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004). By engaging with this work, James could have avoided making such problematic arguments as the following one:

Crime fiction today is more realistic in its treatment of murder, more aware of scientific advances in the detection of crime, more sensitive to the environment in which it is set, more sexually explicit and closer than it has ever been to mainstream fiction. (146)

Representations of sex and violence in contemporary detective fiction are frequently more explicit than they were during the genre's 'Golden Years'. Yet explicitness does not always equal realism. James seems to imply that detective fiction is not 'mainstream'. She then aligns detective novels with 'popular literature' (157). James never clarifies the difference between 'popular' and 'mainstream', nor does she define these terms. James argues: 'We do not expect popular literature to be great literature ...' (157). Such views about popularity and literary merit are outmoded.

Talking About Detective Fiction is best read as an homage to James' love for this literary genre. Readers looking for a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of detective narratives are advised to look elsewhere.

Dr Jay Daniel Thompson completed a PhD in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne in 2009. He is currently a freelance writer, researcher and reviewer. Jay lives in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au

TEXT review

Creative Writing is...?

review by John Weldon



Graeme Harper
On Creative Writing
New Writing Viewpoints 2010
ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-257-3 (hbk)
ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-256-6 (pbk)
Pb 125pp AUD19.95

Perhaps it would be better to start this review off by saying what this book is not: it is not a guide to creative writing. There are none of the hints, workshop exercises or insights that readers might expect from a book written by a Professor of Creative Writing and titled *On Creative Writing*. I'll say it again: there is no advice whatsoever, in this book, on how to string words, phrases and sentences together such that they appeal to the reader or publisher.

Instead, Harper sets out to uncover what creative writing actually is. What do we mean when we talk about creative writing as an activity? What do we mean when we refer to something as a piece of creative writing? What do we understand, or intend, when we use/utter/refer to the phrase creative writing in any context whatsoever?

By avoiding the 'how to' and concentrating on the 'what is it?' side of creative writing Harper removes his enquiry entirely from the romantic and esoteric aspects of the art leaving him free to explore, in a quite academic and empirical fashion, what it means to engage in the actual process itself. (At times he's almost Socratic, as in dialectic, and he certainly verges on the Brechtian too. Chapter titles such as, "All works of Creative Writing are Disseminated?" remind the reader very much of scene titles from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, or *Mother Courage and her Children*.)

Not that Harper would use the word ‘process’ to describe an engagement with creative writing. Harper makes , “...a concerted effort...to avoid using the word ‘process’ when referring to creative writing, in favour of talking about acts and actions and activities.” (60) Harper views process as a linear and therefore limiting term to use in describing an activity that is so inherently non-linear, so dependent on an ever-in-flux, difficult to direct, partnership between intellect and instinct. Process for him, implies that there is a start and a finish to all works of creative writing, that each work is somehow discrete and containable and that the enterprise is necessarily outcome driven. We are limited in our understanding of the art, he argues, when we view it purely as a means of production.

The process approach to creative writing, according to Harper, was driven by the rise of consumerism in the 20th century and the consequent dominance of an economic system based on the exchange of goods and services, which inevitably lead to a commodification of creative writing and to the valuing of the end product (book, poem, play etc) of the activity above all else.

Harper counters this focus on the end game, By suggesting that creative writing consists of ‘acts, actions and activities’ (60) which may or may not result in a published/publishable piece of work, reminding us that much of even the most successful (in terms of numbers of commodities shifted) creative writer’s work remains unseen and unrecognised. By refusing to privilege any one activity or action above the other, refusing to acknowledge the publishable item as the only legitimate outcome of these activities he attempts to disabuse of our commodity-focussed understanding of creative writing. He also raises the interesting notion that, as we only (in the main) archive and collect finished works, and then only those which attain a certain literary measure, that we necessarily ignore the vast majority of creative writing, both published and unpublished, rendering any sort of cultural/literary creative writing collections inherently elitist, marginal or, at best, incomplete.

This book is an engaging attempt to explore a field of artistic enterprise from an angle that is very much often ignored. It is refreshing to see act/process/mysterious game (call it what you will) that we term Creative Writing discussed in such a thorough and rigorous manner. Much of what Harper says might already be intuitively known by creative writers: not all creative writing results in finished works, not all works communicate, not all works meet the intentions they are begun with, and so on, but it is interesting and enlightening to see the implicit made explicit:

Creative Writing involves behaviour patterns and human dispositions, perceptions and memories. It is both working and works, not separated, and nor placed in a hierarchy determined by external forces but a continuity derived from the simple equation: to be a creative writer means undertaking Creative Writing. (115)

Only one thing let’s this book down and that is the presentation. It is so uncreative, so unamenable, dry and academic looking. The pages are crammed with type, the margins are small, it looks cheap, but it isn’t (in terms of content). As such it doesn’t invite you to pick up, which is a shame as the book, contains much for the student, practitioner and critic of creative writing alike.

John Weldon is a freelance writer and lecturer in Professional and Creative Writing at Victoria University.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 2 October 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au