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Reviews contents

***TEXT* Review**

Poetry: The abstract personal reality

review by Peter Mitchell

True North
Bernard T. Harrison
Five Islands Press (School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong)
2004
ISBN 1-74128-075-3
91pp.

Bones
L. E. Scott
Five Islands Press (School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong)
2004
ISBN 1-74128-076-1
72pp.

It has been suggested that we are witnessing the death of the poet in the literary marketplace, but rumours of poetry's demise have been greatly exaggerated. Poetry will probably pull through, but teachers of writing need to adjust their pedagogies in order to give it relevance in a changing world. Poetry in written form is read in the niche-lands of the Internet and in boutique publications. Performed poetry reaches audiences in forums such as poetry breakfasts at music festivals, tertiary creative writing programs, writing appreciation classes and even as part of the stand-up comedy circuit. For all of this, poetry was once a much more socially significant way for readers to access personal and confessional writing. However, audiences retain a taste for personal 'truths'. The descent of poetry contrasts with the ascent of related literary forms: autobiography and 'true story'. It may be that potential readers of poetry are not being strategically exposed to its powers during their formal education.

The survival of published and performed poetry in various and innovative forms is a measure of the flexibility of poets who have had to seek out their audiences wherever they can. The popularity of lyric-centred music styles, such as Hip Hop, Rap and Independent Rock also reflects the taste for personal and poetic writing. The implication for teachers and students of writing is that pedagogies need to be as adaptable as poets have been. The study of poetry at school needs to better connect with the real world experiences of young audiences. The uses of ecological and urban themed poetry, humour and song-poems are approaches that will tap the interest of future appreciators of poetry. In times such as these, Harrison's *True North* and Scott's *Bones* are vital expressions of poetic personal realities and, because they deal with contemporary themes in a range of voices and styles, would serve as excellent pedagogical tools.

Harrison and Scott come from diverse backgrounds and it is no surprise that they have different styles. They might consider themselves connected only by the fact that they share Five Islands Press as their publisher, but I detect other points of connection. Principally, *True North* and *Bones* trace the arcs of poets' lives that began in the northern hemisphere and led to poetic perspectives that were drawn together in the southern hemisphere, from either side of the Tasman Sea.

Scott is described as an 'African American jazz poet', but he is more than this. Living in New Zealand when *Bones* was published in 2004, Scott has emerged over thirty-five years of writing and publishing poetry as a world citizen. He is a profound observer and thinker and the twenty-six poems in *Bones* contain a complex amalgam of themes, worthy of a poet of his accomplishment.

Bones encompasses blackness and light, joy and sorrow and is not a book for the faint hearted. Containing contradictions in this way may be confusing - to seek after simplicity and complexity in the same endeavour, to seek moral truth in an amoral world. Scott's book, however, suggests that because there is life in death, and vice versa, inherent contradiction is elemental to being alive and, therefore, fundamental to poetry.

Scott's poems are embedded in earth tones and dwell in the tortured spirit of a man looking for meaning in difficult times. Scott writes with a spiritual rhythm that harkens back to his Baptist upbringing and the black gospel churches of his childhood. This remains his signature, even if works such as 'A Poem For God' suggest that Scott now mourns a lost faith. Many of the poems are dark in tone and draw heavily on the inevitability that the concerns and substance of humankind will pass. This is not new. It is, perhaps, apart from 'love and loss', the central occupation of poets throughout the ages.

In Harrison's case, the thirty-five poems in *True North*, surprisingly his first published collection of poems, also reflect the concerns of poets throughout time. There is, however, a more deliberate blending of classical and modern writing styles. This considered approach may reflect Harrison's career as an academic and scholar of English and teaching. This is not intended as a criticism. There is a powerful erudition at work in *True North*. Harrison's word play creates a sense of yearning for a mythological past. This lies beneath the surface of many of his reflections. The overall effect is a contemporary-epic poetry hybrid. It is in this that we hear Harrison's original voice.

There are three sections in *True North*, 'Deliverance', 'Oceania' and 'Legends'. These divisions represent stages from the author's life, moving from languid English and European landscapes through to the harshness and drama of Australia. Not surprisingly, the nostalgia for a revered place and a golden age, presumably for places associated with Harrison's own childhood and youth, is most obvious in the 'Deliverance' section:

> There, in the garden, in the July heat,
> The scents of fresh-leaved mint, sweet marjoram
> Weighed in the heavy air, mingled with spikes [of lavender]
> -
>
> (14)

Into the garden come lovers, exchanging words 'like shuttlecocks'. The writing has an old fashioned flavour and creates a sentimental mood.

Harrison establishes his poetic palate of myth and nature, with which the incursions of latter-day human activity will be explored as *True North* unfolds. Harrison is methodical and writes in a structured way. He is not as spontaneous as Scott but neither is he as morbid.

Scott writes from a darker place. Recurring images in many of his poems reflect and explain the book's title. From the outset, Scott quotes Richard Selzer:

> [Bones are] the keepsake of the earth, all that remains of
> man -
>
> (9)

Scott's own bony images include:

> …some woman opened her legs
> something fathered
> you
>
> us can't say
> there was a gatekeeper
> some other children - grown up now
> came back too, and stoned
> the keeper
> it was that kind of crime
> us don't know
> if it was true
> or not
>
> people run
> in wolf packs too
> digging up bone -
>
> (51)

And:

> …camels sensing that even in death
> their bones will not be
> free -
>
> (45)

Inevitability, dust, ash, decaying flesh, blood, growth, rebirth ('…we are born again in wind-dust memories…' (45), ancestral bones (witness to time passing), all combine to give Scott his central themes, which he explores alongside his own identity.

> There is a man festering in the sun
> red eyes
> blueblack skin
> heart turned upside-down
> like an afrikan turtle on dry land -
>
> (45)

There are funeral poems, hymns of despair and darkness, but amidst this there is new life and the occasional rainbow, even if only in a child's memory (14). The sense that life is precious and fleeting is never far from the surface.

Harrison deals with the passing of beauty in his own way. In much of *True North* the natural world is retreating as 'brute commercialisation' encroaches. In 'Seaforth', from 'The Seaforth Sestet', hollyhocks and penguins are juxtaposed with urban developments. The next poem in the sestet, 'The Barbie', explores the 'mosquito buzz' of intolerance among guests at a typical Aussie barbecue. As the sestet proceeds, aboriginal motifs are set against selfishness, traced by Harrison to colonial pastoralists and miners. This extract from 'The Banquet' captures a sense of Harrison's tone and motivation for writing epic poetry:

> Where can I begin to show
> You, how the inspiration
> For life's epic poetry here,
> On the edge of endless land, and
> Endless seas, springs from its vast
> Indivisibility?
>
> Its protean spirit flew
> Through cathedrals of karri,
> Jarrah, tinglewood - revered
> By the people of the land -
> Into whips, thorns, the flayed skins
> Of thieves in prisoner lines -
>
> (50-55)

The land provides a bounty - a banquet - and none but those who are dead in Gingin cemetery, turning 'to dust through the summer's heat' and draining away with the winter rains, have ever understood, respected or celebrated the Earth. The poems in 'The Seaforth Sestet' are eloquent and tragic and are Harrison at his best.

Scott's poems may be broadly categorised into the 'personal' and the 'political'. Like Harrison, he does not shy away from making judgements about the evil he perceives in the world. He rails against uncaring government and poor health care (34), ethnic cleansing (59), the 'war against terrorism' (25), and the 'unrighteous black leaders of Africa' (20). For all Scott's conviction, these poems, to my mind, are less successful than his personal ones.

The theme of 'death of the father' is handled beautifully in *Bones*. From the chilling and recognisable reality on the occasion of a father's funeral - presided over by a Minister who barely knew the deceased (32) - to the touching internal dialogue in 'Nightfall - To Slay The Father', we see something of Scott's own struggle. Scott is drawn to the 'father theme', both as a metaphor for God and the world and because he seeks to resolve his own feelings for a flesh-and-blood parent who was hated and loved while he lived. 'Nightfall - To Slay The Father' is also interesting in a literary sense as it includes an argument about the use of 'the poem' by the poet as a coping mechanism for grief. There is poignancy in Scott's struggle to lay his father's ghost:

> I need to finish this poem, I need you out of my head. I
> walk into a dark room and see my father, I hear voices -
> how do I get out of this graveyard? Did the undertaker bury
> the key to the gate with my father? Dig up the dead, let us
> all be free. Father, I love you in death as I never did… (68)

Scott intersperses the intimate and simple with what appear to be intentionally bewildering elements, designed, perhaps, to give the impression that treasures are buried within an avalanche of poetry, as bones are buried within the implacable earth.

Trends in publishing come and go. Major publishing houses have all but abandoned poetry as a viable genre and poets who are not already well known have gravitated to niche markets such as the few remaining poetry reviews, the Internet, non-traditional performance venues and small-scale publishing. I wonder if it is a paradox that during the mainstream descent of poetry there has been a rise in the popularity of autobiography and biography or if it is a reflection that curricula in schools incorporate extensive study of film and television - genres that require less effort in order to grab a hit of the personal? Has this pedagogical shift merely followed societal trends and has this, in turn, pushed poetry aside? There should, of course, be room for both, but I suspect that overly esoteric poets have contributed to the alienation of recent generations of readers. The pedagogical challenge has always been to develop approaches to poetry that are relevant to the age they are written in. As a poet once sang:

> [The] old road is rapidly agin'
> Please get out of the new one
> If you can't lend your hand
> For the times they are a-changin'.
>
> (Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, 1964)

The best poetry always conveys a sense of who the poet was or wanted to be and, in this sense, is closely akin to autobiography. This suggests that a wider market for well-crafted and relevant poetry may yet exist. The key for teachers and students of writing is to exploit teaching strategies and entertainment technologies and to embrace the realities of the literary marketplace. In the case of Harrison and Scott, they both manage to give their readers powerful insights into their lives, concerns and hopes. The desire to write about oneself is integral to human communication and Harrison and Scott's shared insights are a measure, by any yardstick, of successful writing. *Bones* and *True North* are fine collections of contemporary poems for teachers and students to explore and use and they deserve a wider audience than they will reach.

Personal poetic realities are artifices constructed out of pieces of the truth but they are no less real for that. The poetic deconstruction and reassembly of reality allows us to better see its essences. Harrison and Scott have written complex yet approachable collections and are to be congratulated. But, like poets everywhere, they may suffer from and be guilty of the charge:

> It is always the poem, isn't it? No matter the agony or the destitution, you reduce it to the poem -
>
> (Scott 69)

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***TEXT* Review**

Brown Paper Packages and How to Open Them

review by Rosemary Williamson

The Australian Editing Handbook, second edition
Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill
John Wiley & Sons Australia, 2005
ISBN 1 74031 088 8
358pp. Pb AU$44.95

In her memoir, *Stet: An Editor's Life*, Diana Athill tells how she once edited a manuscript so extensively that she reworked every paragraph and rewrote almost every sentence, relaying it back and forth between herself and the bad-tempered author. Nevertheless, she found it an enjoyable task: 'It was like removing layers of crumpled brown paper from an awkwardly shaped parcel, and revealing the attractive present which it contained...' The book was published and received an excellent review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, with a comment that it was 'beautifully written'. The author sent Athill a note: 'You will observe the comment about the writing which confirms what I have thought all along, that none of that fuss about it was necessary' (37-38).

Is the 'fuss' necessary? Of course it is. Is it enjoyable? For some undoubtedly it is, but for others, getting rid of that crumpled brown paper can be a complex, frustrating, thankless and underpaid job, particularly when faced by the challenges now presented by e-publishing. Like many editors, however, I keep coming back for more. I have been involved in editing corporate and academic publications, had my own writing subjected to the editor's pen (and mouse), been a student of writing and editing and, most recently, begun to teach writing and editing. The *Australian Editing Handbook* did not exist when I began editing, and it certainly would have helped to make sense of what I essentially learned on the job over many years.

The *Australian Editing Handbook* was first published in 1994 by the Australian Government Publishing Service before being reprinted in 2001 by Common Ground Publishing and then by Wiley in 2003. The long-awaited, fully revised and updated second edition comes to us from Wiley, who also publish the current, sixth edition of the Australian Government's *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (2002, reprinted in 2003). Presented as a companion to the current *Style Manual*, the *Handbook* has adopted the same size and format and has a new, distinctive cover in autumnal tones that provide a subtle visual link with the *Manual*. The editors of the *Handbook* have taken care not to duplicate material from the *Manual*, but have cross-referenced it appropriately. For those who wish to learn more about particular aspects of editing, the *Handbook* has a bibliography, based on that found in the first edition but updated and

supplemented by reputable online references which, hopefully, will remain current until the next edition appears. A useful list of organisations and contact details that may be helpful to editors also appears at the end of the book.

The glossary of publishing terms in the opening pages of the first edition has disappeared and been replaced in this second edition with a running glossary of marginal definitions in the contrasting red type that has always characterised the *Handbook* and contributes to its high level of visual appeal. At times I found the repetition of definitions in different parts of the book irritating; my eye was drawn too frequently by the red type to definitions that I remembered from earlier parts of the book, or with which I was already familiar ('indent' or 'house style', for example). Rather than being a fault, however, this points to the suitability of the *Handbook* for the less experienced editor, for whom the explanation of key words used in the text will be a helpful aid to understanding and learning.

Indeed, in the preface to the second edition, the editors clearly define their primary target audience as 'both inexperienced editors and publishing students'. The editors also comment, quite rightly, on the usefulness of the *Handbook* to more experienced editors whose training was informal or incomplete. To that I would add other potential readerships: all who are grappling with the demands of e-publishing, and authors who wish to acquire an understanding of editorial roles and processes in the contemporary publishing industry.

With the expansion of electronic media, the editing profession has become significantly more complex. The *Handbook* editors have managed, however, to arrange a vast amount of information into three logical parts, each comprising a number of chapters. Part 1, 'Introduction to publishing', outlines the responsibilities of those employed by, or associated with, a publishing company, and also addresses project management and the production process. Part 2 is entitled 'The basics of editing' and contains chapters on the editor's role, the mechanics of marking up copy, the specific structural elements of a book (pages preceding the main text, for example), illustrations, proofreading, what happens in the final stages of a project (such as indexing), and the specialist editing of materials, including mathematics and science books. Part 3, 'The editor in the electronic age', covers on-screen editing and electronic publications.

The first two parts largely update material from the first edition, although there are some noteworthy additions. The section on project management is completely new and reflects the importance of project managers in publishing environments in which freelance and contract work have increased. There is also a new section on workplace health and safety that emphasises the need for ergonomically sound work environments and practices. The specialist editing chapter, which also appeared in the first edition, has added sections on medical and legal publications, academic publications (journals, conference papers, teaching and learning materials, scholarly books), and newspapers and magazines. While no attempt has been made to be exhaustive, the summaries in this chapter serve not only to describe salient aspects of these specialised professional areas, but also to draw the aspiring editor's attention to the broad range of career opportunities available.

It is Part 3, 'The editor in the electronic age', however, that really sets the second edition apart from its predecessor. The first chapter sets out the basics of on-screen editing and covers such topics as the differences

between on-screen and hard-copy editing, the special responsibilities involved in on-screen editing, file management, formatting, tracking changes, templates and styles, proofreading, and the index. Many straightforward instructions for the functions commonly used in electronic editing are provided in this chapter, as well as examples drawn directly from Microsoft Word using a PC platform (perhaps a little disappointing to Apple Macintosh devotees). The second chapter deals with editing electronic publications and contains information on websites, electronic repackaging of publications, designing electronic publications for multiple uses, e-books, e-journals and e-newsletters. As an editor with more experience in hard-copy than on-line editing, I found Part 3 to contain the most interesting material in the new *Handbook* because of its comprehensive, practical and useful demonstration of the capabilities of this relatively new field of editing.

One of the strengths of this edition is the increased number and range of examples and illustrations to complement the text, particularly the well-chosen examples of online editing. Checklists that can be applied in the workplace or adapted to particular projects are suggested, as they were in the first edition, but this version has more of them and they are now visually distinctive and easier to find. The book also includes diagrams that simplify some aspects of publishing that can be difficult to explain. While not a new feature, again these have been updated and supplemented.

Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill are experienced editors who, through the *Australian Editing Handbook*, have made a valuable contribution to their profession. The *Handbook* is an excellent resource for students of editing and publishing, and for inexperienced editors, whatever their professional context, as well as for those who wish to update their skills in the electronic age. It brims with relevant information that is sensibly organised and, through the selective inclusion of bullet points, tips, examples and illustrations, is easy to locate and understand. Comprehensive and attractive, the *Handbook* is a reference that readers will consult time and time again.

My only misgiving is that after reading this book, I was left with the impression that if I understand what everyone in publishing does, if I am organised, know what I am doing and have coffee to hand, all will be well. When I began editing I was, to the contrary, struck by the number of obstacles I faced that were beyond my control. There were people who dismissed my deadlines as bureaucratic pettiness, tense negotiations about proposed changes to text, technology that failed at the eleventh hour, pay cheques that did not arrive on time, mysterious muddles and quarrelsome commotions. Editing projects involve many types of collaboration between many types of people, some of whom have an enormous personal investment in their work. As Diana Athill no doubt found, sometimes the most challenging - and rewarding - part of the job is dealing with such issues and still producing a successful publication. While an outstanding resource, the *Handbook* will, therefore, only help fledgling editors to reach their full potential if they are also provided with good training, mentoring and workplace experience.

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the personal and professional development of their readers both as individuals and as members of extended communities.

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***TEXT* Review**

Productive Difficulties: the Pedagogy of Gerald Murnane

review by Patrick West

Gerald Murnane
Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs: Essays
Giramondo Publishing Company, Sydney, 2005
ISBN 1-920882-09-X
x + 230pp. Pb AU$24.95

The publisher's blurb tucked under the cover of my review copy tells that in 1999 Gerald Murnane 'received the Patrick White Literary Award in recognition of his distinguished contribution to Australian writing'. What is the nature of that contribution? And what's to be gained by seeing White and Murnane as connected other than through this award?

I ask these questions with my lecturer-of-creative-writing hat on, but that's far from the only starting point for interpretation made available to a reader of this collection of non-fiction. Spanning the years 1984 to 2003 - with a heavy clustering of contributions sourced from the mid-to-late 1980s - the thirteen chronologically ordered essays cover the entire range of Murnane's concerns, and yes, it's true to say, of his unique obsessions.

A reader can follow the threads of Murnane the proto-deconstructionist, of Murnane the devotee of the images in his head, of Murnane the aficionado of randomness within patterns, even (more humourously) of Murnane the observer of national identity. 'In general,' he notes of 1949, 'an Australian thought English thoughts indoors and when solemnity was called for. Out of doors one could be Australian, and more light-hearted' (4). Lines like these tend often to send one's thoughts snaking off to re-experience the effects of the counterpart moments they gesture towards within Murnane's actual fiction.

This is one of the ways in which the essays in this collection blur or 'over-write' the non-fiction/fiction distinction. However, the impact of this collection qua collection - as opposed to the effect of a 'diaspora' of individual pieces - is a related factor in forcing a reconsideration of the circumstances of a reader's reception to Murnane's overall output.

Of course, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* is a 'reverse diaspora', bringing together what was once disseminated through a variety of publication forms across Australian literary and writing culture. But even if many of these essays will probably already be familiar to the reader, the fact of their collection is a significant development in Murnane criticism.

Although the back cover teases with its reference to Murnane's 'curious and eccentric imagination', reading these collected essays stimulates quite a different perspective on that mind from which they can be said to have emerged (if it is granted that writing does emerge mainly from minds). Much more than a simple tracing of the 'development' of a writer's ideas, the collection reflects the way in which Murnane's world-view appears always already to be both simple and complicated, and also how the simplicity and the complication are interlocked on many levels. To this extent, the philosophy of writing that these ideas constitute is powerfully internally consistent, and the reader is seduced into close and involving engagement with the detail of Murnane's world-view. The notion of a 'curious and eccentric imagination' withers away as the collection is read start to finish.

An example might be useful at this point. In 'Meetings with Adam Lindsay Gordon', Murnane writes that 'a racecourse is a landscape - and a landscape that is no mere backdrop but an arena where many doubtful issues can be resolved' (7). That simple sentence was published in 1984. Later, in 2003's 'The Angel's Son', the 'stream system' ('I write fiction by following the stream system' (147)) arrives at the following formulation:

> The rider of the horse Angel's Son will lower his whip gracefully an instant before the horse reaches the finish-line. What prompts the rider to do this is an event such as could happen only on a racecourse in the mind of such a person as can visualise only a racecourse whenever he looks for a meaning of meanings. (224)

This would seem to indicate the progression - the increasing complexity - of a thought over twenty years, but of course Murnane's first book, *Tamarisk Row*, with its complex furlong-long sentences, was published a good ten years before 'Meetings with Adam Lindsay Gordon', in 1974.

What this collection tends to foreground, therefore, is a complexity of thought that seems always already (from the beginning?) to contain many levels within itself, and which, relatedly, never threatens to collapse under the pressure of its own preoccupations. Each further pass at elaboration complements rather than threatens the internal consistency of Murnane's concerted attempts to describe that site and that moment in which art looks at life only to find that it is looking, in fact, at no more and no less than a version of itself.

So, to return to this issue of the non-fiction/fiction divide, not only do moments in the collection intimate their fictional counterparts in the novels and story/novella collections, but this collection itself - pulling tight the many threads of Murnane's intellect - fosters credulity as a counter-impulse to our stirred-up incredulity at the products of a 'curious and eccentric imagination'. By sending us off to renewed engagements with the fiction, *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs* also operates to capture the fiction within the sphere of its own non-fictional ideas, which serves to generate a larger sense of Murnane's 'system'.

In 'The Breathing Author', Murnane confesses that 'I have sometimes thought of the whole enterprise of my fiction-writing as an effort to bring to light an underlying order - a vast pattern of connected images - beneath everything that I am able to call to mind' (162). How many other writers (William Blake springs to mind) can claim to have created such an impressive writing cosmography, which (more than ever after the

publication of this collection) spans the gamut of both fiction and non-fiction?

Gerald Murnane's contribution to Australian writing, then, might depend upon the extent to which he is willing, following Robert Bly, 'to trust his obsessions', and in particular his obsessions to document the process of his practice, in both fiction and non-fiction (p. 41, from 1987, and p. 168, from 2001/02). If not necessarily a model for others to follow, his example is, at least, a certain sort of 'eccentric' provocation for the attempts of other writers to 'systematize' their own creative output. The view from the 'outside' of Murnane's 'system', that is, might continue to frame his writing as curious and eccentric, even as the view from the 'inside' - much facilitated with the publication of this collection - makes his oeuvre seem much less recondite or associated with 'eccentricity'.

I asked at the head of this review whether there could be any value in going more deeply into the notion of a connection between Gerald Murnane and Patrick White. On this topic, I want to reference the conclusion to Simon During's Oxford Australian Writers study of Patrick White, in which he suggests that White's impact on our literature, institutions and culture might survive precisely through those aspects of his work that grate with today's sensibilities. Will Murnane, similarly, survive only despite himself, as a provocation to present and future forms of Australian literary and cultural production? 'Where,' During asks in 1996, 'is scandalous, difficult, truly heterodox writing and culture being produced or sought after?' Perhaps it is, after all, the idea of Murnane's eccentricity (the view from 'outside' of his thought) that should require the most careful preservation in the 'softly repressive' (During) cultural climate of present-day Australia.

Indeed, it's only through some version of this same formulation that I can rescue from Murnane's collection anything of direct usefulness to teachers of creative writing. Some of Murnane's comments on his own teaching practices are merely unexceptional. Of the rest, they resist ready translation into generalizable pedagogic principles either for being too general ('[poor] stories by previously unpublished writers most commonly made me suspect that the writers were nervous' [p. 87]) or, at the other end of the spectrum, for being too tied to what could be called the ('eccentric') business of being Gerald Murnane:

> Then I used to do in front of the class something that few teachers of fiction-writing can have done in a classroom. Sometimes by writing key words on the whiteboard, and sometimes by miming with my hand in the air the writing of sentences that I spoke at the same time aloud, I tried to show my students how I would have begun an as-yet-unwritten piece of short fiction. (169-70)

There might, in fact, be very good reason why 'few teachers of fiction-writing can have done in a classroom' anything like what Murnane describes here! I can see learning lagging quite a way behind teaching in this example, as there is clearly a sharp distinction to be drawn between doing something as a teacher, and enabling others to do it as well. It's far from an impossible stretch to agree with the observation 'that a person paid to teach others a skill ought to be able to exercise that skill in front of the others and to give a full and clear account of the exercising' (169). But were Murnane's students expected to go home after class and 'exercise' their own skills in exactly the same way?

Writers must, to some degree, be solipsistic so as to write. Certainly Murnane's solipsism is a thread running from start to end of this collection. But teachers need to be able to turn their solipsism 'inside out' when they step across the threshold of the writing classroom.

A little earlier in the essay just quoted from, 'The Breathing Author', Murnane discusses the 'statements' on fiction writing that he used to draw upon in his university teaching: 'I did not collect only statements that I myself could agree with. I collected a range of statements so that I could usually offer my students not only my own views on fiction-writing but also an opposing view' (167). One part of me would have liked to hear a little more about such tensions facing off Murnane the teacher with Murnane the writer.

Still, precisely for being what it is, Murnane's notion of pedagogy serves up a challenge to those philosophies of learning and teaching that some of us as educationalists have possibly become just a little too comfortable with. At least, we can say that all orthodoxies need regular challenging. Murnane's own experience of tertiary teaching seems to have been unhappy towards the end. He makes dark mutterings about 'the mode of administration' that forced him out (167). As a teacher of creative writing, the very 'difficulty' of reconciling Murnane's ideas on teaching with my current institutional context and its pedagogic practices is perhaps the most salutary aspect of this collection.

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***TEXT* Review**

Surfers Paradise: A Fatal Attraction

review by Casey Stewart

The People Singers: The Surfers Paradise Poems
John Millett
Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2005
ISBN 1 74128 095 8
96pp. RRP AU$18.95

As a born-and-bred Gold Coaster, I wanted to enjoy this latest offering from poet John Millett, *The People Singers: The Surfers Paradise Poems*. I was excited to see how Millett would approach the task of translating the Gold Coast through poetry, and thought it would be refreshing to revel in the familiarity of my own city through this medium. It is unfortunate, however, that the collection didn't quite satisfy my expectations. Utimately, it sinks into territory that does a disservice to both Millett and his subject: the city of the Gold Coast and its residents.

I approached this collection from the perspective of a (recent) past student with an interest/awareness of the Gold Coast (and the connotations that surround it as a place) and the way that craft is (or can be) transmitted. Often, the greatest lessons for students/practitioners/teachers are imparted through work that fails to realise its potential. Accordingly, a clear pedagogy is present throughout this collection; it teaches through its faults and its virtues.

Contemplating the title and the bromidic glossy photograph of Main Beach wrapped around the cover of the book (a view into Surfers Paradise; blue sky, blue water, high rises reflected on wet sand), I was disappointed that Millett seemed to have limited both himself and his poetry, from the outset, by succumbing to that fatal attraction of writing solely about the 'glitter strip'.

My worries were subdued, if temporarily, when, after a scan through the contents, it became apparent that Millett's intention was to embark on a journey/tour/investigation of the Gold Coast in its entirety; from Coolangatta to Mount Tamborine, and everywhere in between.

I do wonder though, if the poems are not exclusively related to Surfers Paradise, why does Millett name his collection, *The Surfers Paradise Poems*? Should it not more appropriately be titled *The Gold Coast Poems*? Perhaps this is only a vexation for Gold Coast residents. A friend of mine works in the tourism industry and often relays his exchanges with would-be-tourists who invariably ask that most reviled question, 'Surfers Paradise is the Gold Coast…isn't it?'

We may never be entirely successful in creating the desired distinction between the Gold Coast as a whole and the tourist haven of Surfers, yet I was disappointed that Millett, a fellow writer and local Coast resident, would fall into this all-too-recognisable trap. If anyone should know that the Gold Coast is comprised of more than Surfers Paradise, it should be someone who lives here.

Perhaps it was a marketing decision that led Millett to reduce the Gold Coast to yet another hideously familiar cliché: that Surfers Paradise sells. Of course, poetry publications could benefit from attractive marketing that translates into sales and a more active readership. But unfortunately, in this case, the tactic is inadequate and underwhelming and ultimately diminishes any intent to produce a work that encompasses all facets of the Gold Coast.

It is intriguing that Millett found it apt to include a Leonard Bernstein quote - 'We'll find a new way of living' - as an epigraph to his poetry collection. The Gold Coast as a place, an idea, a culture, is relatively 'new' in many ways and has indeed fostered a 'new way of living.' It has carved out an esoteric, exopolitan existence, in the sense that Edward W. Soja describes this concept: 'a place that spins new whorls of its own' (see Soja's chapter in M. Sorkin (ed.) *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*). Ironically however, many of Millett's poems serve only to reinforce the formulaic image of the Gold Coast. Rather than creating a 'new' way of writing, living or seeing the Coast, the poems of this collection serve primarily to strengthen underlying stereotypes.

In an awkward realisation for me, Millett's introduction confirms that his first encounter with the Gold Coast occurred long before I was even born. However, as his history also extends to life before the Gold Coast, this serves to confirm the theory that pre-conceived ideas of place and environment can have an overpowering effect on both the creative process and the material that a writer/poet/artist produces.

What I mean by this is that while Millett has written about the Gold Coast from a personal perspective, and has provided an observational account of the many different lives that are lived here, there is a constant sense that the reflection and recording of ideas and subjects has been undertaken from the *outside in*. This undercuts what I perceive to be one of the collection's primary aims: that is, to penetrate and closely analyse the Gold Coast, to get inside its many heads, so to speak. As a result, the collection, as a whole, tends to feel a little disconnected from its putative topic.

This is one of the problems associated with writing about such a notorious location. The writer can become tangled and trapped in the reality of the fiction or vice versa. In this collection, poetic description of often clichéd events and subjects seems to dilute the writer's attempt to express an authentic personal experience. The poetry feels artificial and constrained by an unusual approach: a type of 'Gold-Coast-by-numbers' methodology, ticking off the stereotypes as they arise. This is particularly apparent in the poem 'Widows at Jupiter's Casino':

> When they arrive at Jupiters
> neon lights comb their hair.
> A plastic surgeon has shaped
> their smiles. Money has perfumed
> the cars bell boys park. (16)

The try-and-cover-it-all mentality contributes to the sense of stereotype evident throughout the poetry and is probably the least satisfying aspect of the collection. Millett includes all of the (in)famous landmarks, institutions, events and people: the highrises, the Indy, and the Asian tourists of Surfers Paradise; the gamut of human experience from youth to the elderly: alcoholics, sad divorcees, lonely war veterans, the widower who owns 'only a call girl and a set of golf clubs,' helpless widows frittering their money away on the pokies or being deceived by unscrupulous financial planners, the suburban Holden driver; and that mandatory Gold Coast stereotype: the rich, self-indulgent CEO who despite wealth and success remains lonely and miserable.

As a Gold Coaster, this collection is bittersweet to read. There were moments of self satisfaction as I recognised characters, places and circumstances. However, these were either short lived or negated by the uncomfortable resistance that surfaced in response to Millett's chosen portrayal of the Gold Coast.

Several poems - 'Teenage Singer', 'Sally and Madeline', 'Businessman', 'The CEO', and in particular 'Elderly Retiree and Financial Planners' - present people and circumstances that could be fairly described as exaggerations of the most stereotypical characters and situations:

> You will find her
> leaving the Suede & Silk Girls School
> wearing a heroin needle
> and Manolo Blahnik shoes,
> mountains from the Golden Triangle
> locked in her heart and rainbow lorikeets
> trapped in her eyes.
> A Sass & Bede [sic] will flare
> from her hips-and a Hummer
> blow her brain.(30)

This is also evident in Millett's portrayal of Gold Coast widows:

> Often at night the widows
> leave their own bodies
> to imagine themselves
> naked on a stage,
> with horny young men
> in the front stalls, wanting them,
> their BMW's and their money. (54)

The consequence of using such excessive clichés is obvious; Millett's intent and aims are not realised as fully as they could (or should) have been. This is unfortunate because the potential certainly existed for him to present the Gold Coast, and his poetry, in an innovative way.

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of the Gold Coast, especially when writing about it, is that, in many cases, clichés and stereotypes are often accurate representations of reality. The Coast has a knack of welcoming and accepting stereotypes and typecasts; however, whether a writer/poet/artist should use them so readily and blatantly is questionable. It should be possible for a writer/poet to comment on and acknowledge certain stereotypes without reverting to using them in his or her own work. Indeed, a number of Millett's poems are successful in this endeavour, including the poem 'Funeral Parlour', which is an understated vignette of

loss and transition on the Coast. It is with regret that the poems that do achieve this balance are overshadowed by the majority that succumb to the unattractive power of the cliché.

In a number of poems - 'Teenage Singer' in particula r- Millett reduces the youth of the Gold Coast to shallow sex addicts and drug users. He presents an *idea* of youth: a portrait of a generation that has no care for global issues, or indeed any issues other than sex, drugs, image and recklessness. On two specific occasions, Millett uses the example of the 'war on terror' stating:

> They [youth] do not care
> about wars on terror
> or whether or not
> the world is at war
> with an abstract concept -
> for they live in a music
> that sings in their own blood. (64)

While this stereotyping of young people may serve as a metaphor for the Gold Coast's well-recognised youth culture and image (the most obvious manifestation of this being Schoolies Week) it is uninformed to categorise youth in such a general way. As a reader in her twenties, this chosen portrayal alienated me. If I could not relate to Millett's perception of youth, or find any semblance of reality in these poems, believing and engaging with subsequent poems was going to prove very difficult.

In a technical sense, the collection is littered with typographical errors. In one such example, Millett writes of 'Malkeri Street' (as opposed to the correct Markeri Street). While the editor and publisher must surely take some of the responsibility for these errors, it is most unfortunate for a Gold Coast resident, writing a book of poetry about the Gold Coast, to spell one of the city's main streets incorrectly.

A number of other blatant spelling errors cannot be bypassed, most notably: 'Sass & Bede' substitutes for the correct Sass & Bide, 'Stsubi' instead of the correct Tsubi, and 'Louis Vouton' as opposed to Louis Vuitton. These particular errors are made all the more obvious for their close proximity to each other. Initially, I thought it was rather 'cute' that the 85-year-old Millett had misspelt these fashion brands, and while people who are not familiar with these labels may never detect these errors, mistakes of this nature serve only to frustrate many readers. I would always support (cheer even) a writer who selects subject matter from outside his or her comfort zone, knowledge base or experience. However, to do so without engaging in appropriate research defeats the purpose.

As is sometimes the case with work published in a collective state, repetition, recurring faults and sameness are brought to the fore. This is a particularly evident shortcoming in *The People Singers*. Each poem is almost identical aesthetically, adhering to the same form (5-10 lines per stanza) and length (generally one page per poem with only four of the eighty-two poems mildly resisting this trend and spilling onto the next page). Cultivating variety would have been advantageous for Millett, not only to sustain the reader's interest, but also to make a statement about the Gold Coast in its endless multiplicities and possibilities.

When I made a conscious decision to read each poem as an independent entity and evaluate it on its merits alone, each individual poem became

more endearing. However, the context of collectivity tends to overwhelm the reader, and the similitude of poetic form ultimately becomes tedious.

A number of unusual choices have been made regarding the structure and placement of poems throughout the collection. There are a number of poems that set the conditions of the Gold Coast, both physically and culturally, as well as the themes evident in the poetry. But, curiously, these appear past the mid-point of the collection on pages 51 and 73 of this ninety-six-page book. It would have been beneficial for Millett to describe and set the parameters, foundations and limits of his discourse early on and to work from there, rather than scattering these apparently at random. Perhaps this was intended as a comment on the rhizomic, seemingly capricious nature of the Coast. Be this as it may, it could have been articulated much more effectively.

The poems run the point-of-view triathlon, ranging across first, second and third person. This variety works well, and augments Millett's apparent objective to illustrate the many different lives and lifestyles that exist on the Coast. The title of the collection - *The People Singers* - is referred to, either subtly or more blatantly, throughout the poetry, and this focus is one of the book's virtues. It creates a lyrical quality that is threaded through the poems and is neither too dramatised, nor too faint. Conversely, the overuse of references to birds in every possible manifestation (over eighty five in total), whether metaphoric or literal, verges on the comical and is consequently ineffectual.

Towards the end of the collection, the poetry, subjects and ideas are well structured, well written, and infused with wit and sentiment, and the stories behind and between the poems are genuinely interesting. Whether this is a coincidental placement of poems that strike a subjective chord with me, or if they are genuinely 'better' than the rest, is uncertain. However, I would have preferred the collection to consist only of the last twenty or so poems; the rest are seemingly superfluous by contrast.

It is unfortunate that Millett's intentions did not translate, for me at least, into a satisfying or convincing portrait of the Gold Coast. However, despite my criticisms, each individual poem is undoubtedly a genuine attempt to capture a moment or observation from Millett's perspective. This style, form and content may find greater appeal within a wider audience: non-Gold Coast residents, readers that share Millett's views on youth, and perhaps those with a more traditional or conservative set of expectations in matters of style and form.

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