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Reviews contents

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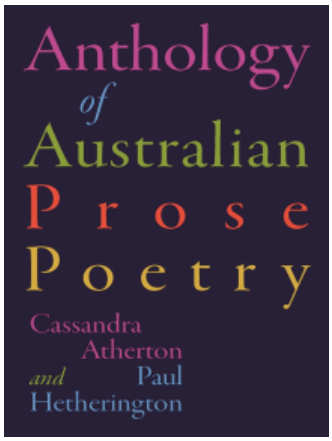
TEXT review

A ringing glass that shivers even as it rings

review by Dominic Symes and Banjo James



Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (Eds.)
Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry
Melbourne University Press, Melbourne VIC 2020
Pb 232pp AUD 39.99

The following is a joint review written by two poets concerned with many of the same ideas, who over the months they discussed *The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* were separated by borders that shifted and changed. The ideas we formed through reading this book appeared vague at first, then clear and distinct, but ultimately by the time it came to write the review, were blurred once again. Something that one of us wrote in correspondence to the other returned under some other subheading in a later draft, unknowingly subsumed into one of our consciousnesses as an idea for its own sake.

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General editor: Nigel Krauth. Reviews editor: Dominic Symes. Assistant reviews editor: Simon-Peter Telford

While it was never our intention to write a piece so beholden to subheadings and dependent on the arbitrary distinction between ideas, the experience of reading this collection is to acknowledge the potency of a succinct form intentionally delineated, to express ideas in a unique and profound way. The prose poem's ability to borrow from the narrative contingency of a prose sentence, whilst appealing to the atemporal flatness of an image in a frame, with its clear edges and hard borders, is a uniquely interesting subject which requires innovative scholarship.

Fortunately, Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington have been able to compile such scholarship over the last five years which has resulted in both this anthology, the first of its kind in Australia released through Melbourne University Press, and a Princeton University Press *Introduction to Prose Poetry* [1].

On Anthologising.

What is Prose Poetry? Is it a genre? A sub-genre? Can one be a prose poet, to the exclusion of all other forms of poetry? To understand why this Anthology demands our attention and why it was brought through the process of publication, is to engage with these elemental questions. It is interesting to note that in one sense prose poetry is reactionary – it is a return to constraint in a post-free verse landscape of contemporary poetry. At its most basic level it is the appearance of a poem, such that to flick through the pages of a book of poetry to locate a prose poem, one sees it before one reads it. To that end, we must define it as a form first and foremost (for one cannot imagine a prose poem being lineated outside of the box), which means that it is accessible to any poet who wishes to arrange their work in such a way. Of course, there is something about the content of a prose poem that develops with prolonged attention and exposure. Atherton, for example, is a prose poet to exclusion of all other forms, and Hetherington's last few collections of poetry have contained predominantly prose poems. In the collection, we also have inclusions by poets who have been frequent proponents of the form: Jordie Albiston, joanne burns, Anna Couani, Samuel Wagan Watson and others. Yet in anthologising, the book is not an anthology of Australian Prose *Poets*. Contained within the anthology are many well-known and well-anthologised Australian poets from the last 50 years alongside prose poem experts, and so it is in this context that the substance of a prose poem is able to be articulated in this anthology: by writers on the fringes, experimenting with the form by dipping their toes in, as well as those who have spent years crafting their work within the form, imbuing that box of text with layers of meaning, and discovering how to project further meaning outside of the frame.

On sight and the metaphoric power of a prose poem's shape.

Accepting that the appearance of a prose poem is the first indication of its status as such, visual metaphors abound. Michael Dransfield's 'Chaconne for a solipsist' begins, 'The most

significant fact about this room is that nothing else exists. Beyond the walls, nothing. Space, perhaps, infinite and invisible' (p. 69). Or consider Andy Jackson's 'That Photograph', which concludes, 'I can only watch, from within that photo as a thin and startled boy wanders around the house' (p. 103). Even Ivy Ireland's 'summer storm', which asks, 'isn't it 3.46am and aren't you standing in a storm-filled caravan' suggests the fixity of an enclosed space that is mirrored in the shape of the poem (p. 102). Conceiving of the prose poem as a room is something Atherton and Hetherington have done in 'Unconscionable Mystification', one of their early scholarly articles on the topic, and which they suggest creates 'anxiety' about the boundary (2015 p. 275); there is a resonance that exceeds such an obvious ending to the poem. Thinking about the poem as a room, the experience of reading many prose poems in a row feels like walking into many rooms for a few seconds at a time. Prose poems often assume context without providing it, which adds to this anxiety of boundaries: the poem has started without you and then cuts itself off, ending, leaving you to complete the poem, to close it off, if such a thing is possible. Paul Hetherington's 2016 book of ekphrastic poetry *The Gallery of Antique Art* and his 2020 *Palace of Memory* enact this tension on every page. These notional spaces are created with the intention to exploit the non-ending of each room housed within a larger architecture. The same way one painting in an exhibition is viewed in sequence with other paintings, this collection of prose poems creates unease by housing rooms so vastly different under the common roof of the anthology. The visual rather than verbal primacy in a prose poem plays with a reader's conception of time. Like story goes about how The Beatles wrote, 'A Hard Day's Night': they entered a room in the daylight and emerged into the darkness of night. Time has passed too quickly. It has slipped away without us noticing. To read a prose poem is to reach the end and feel the same sense of loss and disorientation: while you were suspended in a 'room' outside of time, the world has changed around you.

On visual time compared to verbal time.

Murray Kreiger, in writing the first key text on ekphrasis, centred on the metaphor of a 'freeze', to indicate the ideal way for a poem to align itself with the timelessness of an image contained on a canvas or an attic vase (1967). The difficulty of trying to represent a visual medium in a verbal medium is that language is temporally dependent: syntax forces one word in a sentence to be read ahead of another. The logic of a prose sentence is dependent on an order fixed in time, whereas when we confront an image, while our eyes may be guided by the creator of that image (how it has been composed) we are able to shift across it at our leisure. To try and capture this free movement of the eye in the 'still movement' of poetry will inevitably fail to perfectly represent the atemporal space of the image where the viewer is able to view in their own sequence. In poetry, one thinks of the way Mallarme's late work 'Un Coup De Dés' tries to evoke a similar spatial effect, by fixing the text in a position and allowing the eye to shift over it (1917). Because this must have some sequence, the work comes close to creating its own unique sentences depending on the reader. To fix, or to borrow an image from the world of music, to 'score' the poem, means that each word or phrase

necessarily holds its own space somewhere in the hierarchy of the page. Free verse poetry requires this fixity to evoke poetic effects like enjambment, or jarring line breaks, dual readings across the page from one column against another, even surprise, or space, a breath, a pause, or a stop. A line break has a different power than a full stop: the two are not interchangeable. As a reaction against free verse, prose poetry complicates the prose sentence. It rejects the scoring of each line like that which happens in free verse, and instead gets closer to the stilled image that Kreiger advocates. Consider the poem 'what a man, what a moon' by Anna Couani, the use of anaphora as its own punctuation allows the sentences, rather than poetic lines, to flatten the image; to present the images without a hierarchy, such that the poem could almost be read backward, from the last line first, or by starting in the middle and working in either direction: 'What a man, what a moon, what a fish, what a chip, what a block, what a mind, what a tool, what a drive' (p. 55). The movement of this poem, were it arranged vertically down the page, would be completely different – it would impose a stress on the final, different word and that would run counter to the objective of the poem. This poem achieves an equivalent spatial quality and equivocality to Mallarme's 'Un Coup De Dés', but by flattening out the imagery within the prose poem, rather than scoring it in grand gestures across the page. Quinn Eades' poem 'What grows' demonstrates a poet who is used to breaking lines taking advantage of the equanimity of a full stop. In a similar way to Couani's poem each line acquires its quiet strength from appearing to be visually and syntactically equivalent to the one before. The subtle shifts in time of the speaker's body transitioning are represented evocatively through the unannounced and compounding sequence of lines amassed without the hierarchy of lines and breaths that would have followed had the poem been written in free verse: 'This is how I measure time and transition: hair appearing and disappearing. Finding newly smooth places. Counting months while belly hair moves up to meet my chest scars' (p. 71).

On what prose means to a prose poem.

Some prose poems are the result of poets wishing to tell a story. The poetic line, with its gaps and breaths can distract from the communicative purpose of a sentence when being used to tell a story. The producer Brian Eno loosely defines art as the opposite of purposefulness: 'quite simply art is everything you don't have to do'. The difference between a poetic line and a prose sentence could be divided along similar boundaries of function. Contrasting a poem like John Forbes' 'Tranteresque', with its simple prose sentences, to Jordie Albiston's '[anon]' which jams poetic lines into the box of the prose poem, suggests two very different intentions (pp. 79 & 24). Forbes' poem is invested in functionally communicating a story. While the story begins *in media res* and ends on a note of mystery, these tropes have far more in common with micro-lit and flash-fiction than they do with the rest of his poetic oeuvre. Where in another Forbes poem there may be multiple images, contributing to the 'contingent' and 'modal difficulty' that Aidan Coleman has written about, in this poem language is purposed to tell a story as clearly as possible, to reduce difficulty and subsequently the amount

of 'homework' the reader has to do (2020). Albiston's poem, while just as deserving of title of a prose poem, approaches the form differently, bookending the poem with the phrase 'that's all' – to delimit and seal the poem; to chop the passage of text and loop it back to the beginning; to suggest nothing has changed from start to finish (p. 24). Albiston eschews the full stop and instead separates poetic phrases (not grammatically complete sentences) with three spacebars worth of blankness. This has a similar effect as a full stop, because it is consistent, but it is assertively not a prose sentence. Even the use of ampersands, a common trope in the poetry of Forbes, seems to speed up the reading of a phrase through parataxis. Where Albiston's lines are presented in a prose-looking poem, they are pushing against the flatness of the prose sentence by fiddling with the conventions of punctuation to augment the pace.

On endings.

The experience of glancing over a poem to get a sense of its shape is an undervalued part of how we read poems. A poem with long streaked lines and lots of white space stretching over many pages already feels different to a poem which you can see the first and last lines of in one glance. Going into a poem knowing that it will end quickly, but that most likely you will have prose sentences, rather than dense poetic lines (like one might read in a haiku) creates an anxiety about endings. In a prose poem, you can see the ending at the beginning, but more often than not the ending takes you back to the beginning. The form dictates an ending, but equally, the content of most prose poetry (whether this is being done with awareness of this experience or not) postpones or prevents an ending. While on the surface a prose poem promises brevity, it delivers resonant uncertainty. This collection, a museum with many rooms, more than many other anthologies offers the experience of remaining open to possibility and future significance. Each poem resembles 'a ringing glass that shivers even as it rings', an image from Rilke's 13th 'Sonnet to Orpheus' (p. 95). Like the ringing glass, the solid outlines of each poem continue to warp and shift as if the resonance of each can hardly be contained.

Notes

[1] A review of that book by Moya Costello appeared in *TEXT* Vol 25, No 2 (October 2021): bhttps://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/29570-text-reviews-october-2021

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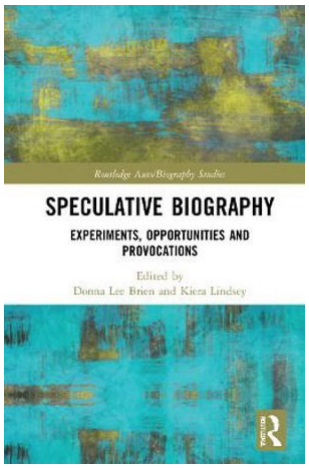
TEXT review

At the forefront of practice research: The speculative method

review by Nigel Krauth



Donna Lee Brien & Kiera Lindsey (Eds.)
Speculative Biography: Experiments, Opportunities and Provocations
Routledge, New York and London, 2022
ISBN 9780367515829 (hbk)
Pb 332pp AUD201.60

We expect that leading research in the creative writing discipline will keep us abreast of exploration and innovation across a broad spectrum of writing practices. This collection of essays, focused on the contentious Speculative Biography sub-genre, does just that.

It brings together scholars from a range of backgrounds – history, literature, art, language, theatre, the environment, business, law, politics, and creative writing – each of them involved with a biography writing project. And as they tell it, each of them found that traditional

methods used by biographers did not suffice to create a viable, informative, readable account of a person's life in the particular circumstances of the texts they were writing.

In the opening chapters of the collection, the editors explain why speculation has entered biography. Information gaps appear in human subjects' lives which no available documentary or interview account can fill, either because those details have been unaccountably lost in the past, are based on unreliable information, or have been legally, politically or domestically suppressed. Other sorts of gaps appear when cultural or gender views of biographer and biographee diverge, or when 'the point' gets lost in language translation. In newer forms of biography, non-human subjects such as animals, places, objects – and even 'invisible' subjects – need to be provided with imagined agency, often in order to combat human attitudes and behaviours which impact them. In all these cases, the biographer is compelled to make imaginative leaps, to fill in the blanks and breaks in the evidence. In traditional biography writing, these leaps may be relatively small – between one document and the next, between one personal account and another. But in radical biographies, bigger leaps are taken.

The situation naturally gives rise to discussion about where speculative biography sits along the spectrum between fiction and non-fiction writing. This book provides excellent consideration of links between speculation and fact. Donna Lee Brien's chapter "'The Facts Formed a Line of Buoys in the Sea of My Own Imagination': History, Fiction and Speculative Biography" brings together the major issues raised by the fledgling genre and is usefully balanced against Kiera Lindsey's chapter "The Speculative Method: Scientific Guesswork and Narrative as Laboratory" which identifies the nature of speculation in the sciences in language creative writers can understand.

Lindsey addresses the fact that theorising and experimentation have lain at the heart of progress in the scientific world for several centuries. She quotes 19th-century scientist William Whewell who said: "Advances in knowledge are not commonly made without … some boldness and license in guessing" (p. 41). Thus the 'scientific method' begins in each experimental instance with a calculated or informed speculation about what the outcome of the experiment will be. What Lindsey calls "the speculative method" in science applies also to biography writing:

> …biography has obligations to both scientific and artistic impulses and … narrative functions as '*the* theorising activity' *par excellence* in which the biographer tests the evidence and refines their analysis as they inform their imagination. (p. 52, italics in the original)

Lindsey suggests that the outcome of the biographer's experiment in creating the subject's 'life world' and making plausible deductions from it, is tested by the author initially and by the reader finally. This insight into how science has always operated and how biography might operate sets the stage for the discussion which follows.

The body of the book focuses on 15 illuminating cases of biography writing where a speculative method is employed in the writing process. These case study chapters are divided into three types: experiments, opportunities and provocations. Each type is divided into three kinds of contribution: reflections on projects completed and published; projects which are works in progress; and projects which are currently at their starting point. With this demarcation of topics, the book becomes not only an informative overall read, but also a text that can be dipped into selectively.

For example, Laura Thompson writes about working with 'suspicious sources' in deciphering the life of a spy; Sarah Pye and Paul Williams consider the challenges of employing empathic anthropomorphism in writing the lives of sun-bears; Rachel Spencer examines speculation in the context of true crime where, legally, in the courtroom, speculation is prohibited; and Linda Wells focuses on a "decolonising reimagining" of life situations in an early 20th century children's home in Central Australia – using speculation to undo the inauthenticity created by the colonial view on indigenous lives.

The book provides a clarifying lens with which to view the practice of speculation in biography writing. For me, as a reader keen to advance my own thinking about where and when writing and reality *ever* meet, this book provokes excellent discussion about the selection and shaping that goes into the writing of biographies – and especially those that admit they are speculating. Having written speculative biography myself in the past, although it was published as fiction, I am enormously interested in the methodologies generated in this new genre. I used to say that my historical fiction got 'closer to the spirit of the truth' than did the depersonalised histories I had read about the eras I attempted to evoke.

This new book convinces me that some of the things good fiction writers do well – e.g. inserting "emotional responses, thoughts and motivations" (p. 3) into character portrayals – with the appropriate checks, balances and triangulation of evidence in place, give us better insight into the lives of *real* people from the past and the present.

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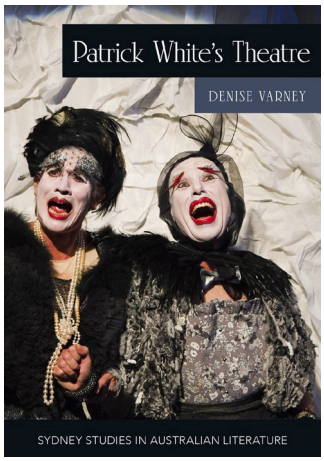
TEXT review

Patrick White the playwright

review by Nicholas Duddy



Denise Varney
Patrick White's Theatre: Australian Modernism on Stage, 1960–2018
Sydney University Press NSW 2021
ISBN 9781743327555
Pb 212 pp AUD45.00

Australian critics have lamented Patrick White's disappearance from our literary culture in recent years. While the legend of the man remains – the man who refused a knighthood, the man who used his Australian of the Year speech to declare that Australia Day is for 'self-searching rather than trumpet-blowing', the man whose prose, a chapter from *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), submitted under the anagrammatic name 'Wraith Picket', was rejected by agents and publishers in a 2006 literary hoax by *The Australian* – so does the question of his legacy: does anybody still read White? Christos Tsiolkas (2018) admits feeling

'ashamed' for not engaging with 'arguably the most eminent of Australian writers' earlier in his life. Describing how his ornate style bewildered our nation of 'plain-speaking larrikins,' Madeleine Watts (2019) concludes 'it would seem, in the end, that nobody could be bothered with Patrick White.' Cultural cringe, identity politics, impenetrable style – many ponder why White, who felt Australia 'in my blood' but also acknowledged 'at heart I am a Londoner', has struggled for survival among our nation's readership (Marr, 1994, p. 419). Despite offering different reasons, critics appear to have reached at least one consensus: the Great White has become, in Martin Thomas's (2021) words, 'a Great Unread'. And this is to say nothing of his drama.

In 1973, when White became Australia's first and – excluding our adopted Coetzee – only winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 'for an epic and psychological narrative art', the honour was, in essence, his novel prize. Acknowledging 'White's growing fame is based chiefly on seven novels,' the Swedish Academy's press release made no mention of White's noble aspirations in the theatre. This is unsurprising: his first four plays, all staged in the early sixties, were received by confused, if not combative, theatre critics ill-prepared for White's bold, anti-naturalist vision. Besides impressing a few admirers, these plays, as White (1983, p. 245) himself put it, 'ended up on the shelf'. Rejecting the stage that rejected him, White returned triumphantly to the page in 1966 with what he deemed one of his best novels, *The Solid Mandala* (White, 1983, p. 145). While his status as a novelist continued to soar over the following decade, his career as a playwright was at a standstill. Indeed, were it not for the 1976 revival of his play *The Season at Sarsaparilla* by Jim Sharman, the young director behind *Hair* (1969), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1972), and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1973), White's plays may have vanished from the Australian theatre (Varney, 2021, p. 101).

Against this context, Denise Varney offers a timely, invaluable study of White's playwriting career in *Patrick White's Theatre: Australian Modernism on Stage, 1960–2018*. While familiar with White's novels, Varney acknowledges that she was 'unaware that he wrote eight plays, and that they represented a corpus of work largely unknown to Australians' (p. 7). From the beginning of her book, Varney outlines the conventional narrative that 'White was a novelist who merely dabbled in playwriting – lured into, and distracted from, important literary work by the call of theatre' (p. 9). Tim Winton (1995), for instance, epitomised this misconception when he wrote of White's 'long and wasteful engagement with the theatre'. Nevertheless, this notion, as Varney persuasively explicates, is as unfair as it is untrue.

White's first love was the theatre. Curious and precocious, he had 'flipped through most of Shakespeare' by the age of nine (White, 1983, p. 7). He regularly attended Sydney shows with his mother, which left him 'stage-struck' (Marr, 1991, p. 385). Whether dreaming of becoming an actor, or reading Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg at boarding school, or penning his first failed plays in London, a young White was fascinated by the infinite magic within the theatre's four walls (Marr, 1991, p. 385). These early theatrical experiences

proved to be formative in his artistic development; as he (1983, p. 244) reflected himself, 'my vocation came closest to revealing itself in those visits to the theatre'. Varney, consequently, presents a revised, refreshing account of White's relationship to the stage, 'of the playwright who turned to the novel and returned to theatre' (p. 10).

Transcending a single-author study, Varney's book 'has not sought to determine whether Patrick White is a great Australian playwright' (p. 175). Instead, *Patrick White's Theatre* frames the playwright's work within broader ideas and issues of Australian culture and nationhood:

> This book is interested in what White's formal innovation, disruption of convention, rejection of tradition, boundary breaking and remaking help us say, do, feel and reflect when considering Australian modernity. It hopes to complement New Wave, postcolonial, intercultural, Indigenous, and postmodern studies of Australian theatre to make the case that White's theatre can be examined in terms of the unresolved issues confronting the nation's history and present. (p. 18)

This loftier project becomes, in turn, more telling and rewarding than a narrow appraisal of White's dramatic oeuvre; not only does Varney identify the playwright's formal flair, but she also illustrates its influence on Australian theatre more widely, especially in challenging the staid literati and in empowering future theatre-makers. While doing so, Varney connects White's drama with global developments, tracing 'the particular ways in which the international or European model of modernist theatre has landed and adapted to the local context' (p. 18). Following close readings of White's eight plays, Varney draws on reviews, interviews, biographical and archival materials to provide a detailed account of how White's work has been staged in different productions over six decades. The result is compelling.

White's playwriting career divides into two distinct periods, the four plays of the sixties and the four plays of the seventies and eighties, offering a neat structure for *Patrick White's Theatre*. In her study of the early plays – *The Ham Funeral* (staged in 1961, though written in 1947), *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962), *A Cheery Soul* (1963), and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1964) – Varney emphasises that it is not that the plays deserved 'a better reception, but that rejection went too far' (p. 11). White's career as a playwright had an inauspicious start. In 1961, the governors of the Adelaide Festival of Arts controversially rejected *The Ham Funeral*, which subsequently premiered at the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild. 'There was to be no privileged access for Patrick White,' Varney explains, 'who by 1961 had published six novels and was an internationally recognised writer' (p. 75). White, evidently, had to prove himself as a playwright. Yet the 'battering' White felt he received over this play set the tone for his relationship with the theatre establishment, who consistently – and, at times, contrivedly – found technical flaws in the work of the 'novelist turned dramatist' (Marr, 1994, p. 186; Varney, 2021, p. 11). White's early plays, as a result, continued to be staged in the sanctuaries of university theatres. Varney attributes this alienation from the Australian mainstages to the fact that his 'early plays stood outside

the *Doll* school', the dominant mode of naturalism that Ray Lawler had deployed in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) with overwhelming success (p. 10). White, though, was less than impressed (Marr, 1991, p. 386). As he admitted in a letter to actor Keith Mitchell, 'I am right off realism' (Marr, 1994, p. 125).

White's early dramas were both premature and prescient for Australian audiences. His dramatic worlds transformed the antipodean model of kitchen-sink realism, the 'slummy backyard of the stage' as long-time *Sydney Morning Herald* and White critic H.G. Kippax (1965/1967, p. 8) labelled it, which pervaded the Australian theatre scene during this period. Consequently, White's plays jarred with critics craving the Scribean comforts of *la pièce bien faite* (p. 176). Many of his plays are built through bricolage, a mosaic of modes – melodrama, vaudeville, expressionism, to name just a few – that collectively defy classification and create what Andrew Fuhrmann (2013) describes as a 'restless, unresolved quality'. Throughout her book, Varney elucidates White's 'layered dramaturgy' by noting consonances between his work and seminal dramatists such as Artaud, Brecht, and Beckett (p. 19). Bringing together the poetic and the demotic, the verbal verve of White's novels is still present in his plays, and yet his use of direct address, metatheatricality, mannered action, and symbolic mise-en-scène maximises the theatre's intrinsic qualities. When first staged, his dramas forced a formal reckoning in Australia. They were 'deeply entwined', as Varney emphasises, with debates 'about realism and anti-realism, naturalism and anti-naturalism, iconic representation and aesthetic formalism, and prosaic language versus poetics' (p. 175). 'You must simply sit it out,' the Young Man addresses the audience in the opening of *The Ham Funeral*, 'and see whether you can't recognize some of the forms that will squirm before you in this mad, muddy mess of eels' (White, 1965/1967, p. 15). Regrettably for White, though, early critics struggled to recognise his theatrical forms, with many left squirming in the morass of his modernist style.

Notwithstanding this bleak beginning, White harboured dramatic aspirations later in his career. 'Though he had tried to give the impression that he was finished with the theatre,' David Marr (1991, p. 559) explains in his masterly biography, 'White's theatrical ambitions were only ever on ice.' The success of Sharman's revival of *Sarsaparilla* encouraged White to return to playwriting with *Big Toys* (1977), followed by *Signal Driver* (1982), *Netherwood* (1983), and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987). While maintaining the imaginative and innovative approach of his early work, the dramas of White's later period 'engaged more overtly with public issues concerning the anti-nuclear movement, mental illness, capitalist materialism, and environmental issues' (p. 175). Varney notes the irony that these later plays, which resonate both in subject and in style with our contemporary times, are revived less often than White's early work (p. 72). This is unfortunate: these neglected plays are just as significant as White's early dramas in revealing the evolution of twentieth-century Australian theatre. Though a 'second wave' of Australian writers – Dorothy Hewitt, David Williamson, Alex Buzo, for example – had arrived on the stage by this point, Varney describes how productions of White's later plays demonstrated a broader shift in Australian

theatre culture, as 'the rise of the director' supplanted the 'playwright-driven drama' (p. 175). In White's case, though, this was beneficial. 'White's texts,' as Fuhrmann (2013) clarifies, 'cry out for intervention; they need all the skills of their interpreters if they are to work.' White found his theatrical bedfellows in Sharman and Neil Armfield, who between them directed the original productions of all four final plays. Indeed, the range of actors, directors, and designers listed in *Patrick White's Theatre* is a testament to White's importance as an Australian playwright. Not only were these collaborators integral to actualising White's theatrical vision, but they were also imperative to advancing the Australian theatre. This is not coincidental. 'White's theatre,' as Varney observes, 'arguably becomes canonical and career-making' (p. 110).

If White's legacy is still in question, perhaps the stage, at least in part, offers a surprising answer. While he 'introduced a new continent into literature', according to the Nobel, White also helped to initiate modernist theatre in Australia. Reading Varney's book, one wonders whether it is the plays – not the prose – that can bring White off dusty shelves and dreaded syllabi and back into the hands and hearts of a wider audience. 'Despite the myth of wasting his best talents in the theatre,' Fuhrmann (2013) contends, 'he is a more influential presence there than he is in contemporary fiction.' And this influence is not solely due to his innovative style. With the proceeds from his Nobel, White established an award in his name that supported 'significant but inadequately recognised' Australian writers. In the decades since Christina Stead was named the inaugural winner, the Patrick White Award has acknowledged playwrights like Louis Nowra, Alma De Groen, and John Romeril. Furthermore, there is a certain poetic justice in the fact that White, whose first foray into the theatre resulted in rejection by the nation's theatre establishment, is now attached to both an award and fellowship offered by the Sydney Theatre Company for Australian playwrights.

Some sixty years after *The Ham Funeral* introduced a singular dramatic voice, White's presence on the Australian stage is felt deeper and wider than first thought. *Patrick White's Theatre*, it must be said, is a significant achievement in illuminating this influence. Traversing the turbulent periods of White's playwriting career, Varney avoids the temptations of hagiography, of merely rewriting White as our forsaken theatrical genius, a label he surely would have hated. Rather, combining hefty research with deft analysis, Varney's book is a vital act in recasting the dramatic art of White the playwright.

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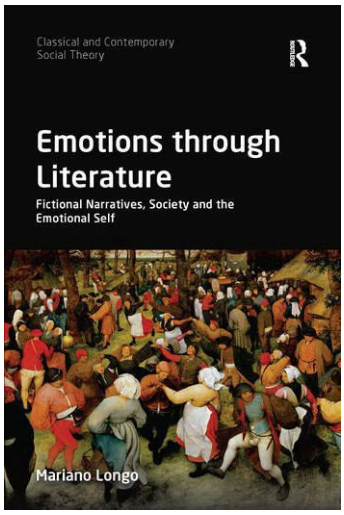
TEXT review

Feelings in and for fiction: The reproduction and elicitation of emotions

review by Jean-François Vernay



Mariano Longo
Emotions through literature: Fictional narratives, society and the emotional self
Routledge, Abingdon 2020
ISBN 9780367726904
Pb 206pp AUD 62.39

Under the impetus of the affective turn, the discussion about reinstating emotions in the interpretation of literature has been going on for the last three decades [1]. *Emotions Through Literature: Fictional Narratives, Society and the Emotional Self* by Mariano Longo takes it a step further by propounding a sociology of emotions through literature. His new Routledge monograph is the sequel to *Fiction and Social Reality: Literature and Narratives as*

Sociological Resources (2017), which casts light on lines of convergence between sociology and literature.

The introductory chapter canvases the sociology of emotions and highlights the dual approach (essentialist/constructivist, i.e. the age-old nature/culture distinction) inherent to the field, justified by the fact that sociology 'looks at emotions as both a cause and an effect of social processes' (p. 4). Social interactions are therefore triggered by emotions (be they transcultural or culture-specific) as much as they can elicit them. Emotions are woven into the fabric of the text (feelings in fiction) through language which gives access to 'the intransparency of the interior world (or the neural impulses)' (p. 9). The alchemy between fiction and emotion cannot be gainsaid, given that fictional narratives impact on readers' emotional states (feelings for fiction), no matter how paradoxical having emotions for things which don't exist may sound (p. 11). However, one can argue against the fact that these emotions are not specifically 'literary' as Mariano Longo would have them. In the first four chapters, this professor of sociology at the University of Salento (Italy) lays the theoretical groundwork for his demonstration that 'a sociological interpretation of emotions through literary materials' (p. 13), as exemplified by the last four chapters, is a legitimate approach in the field of literary criticism. With *Emotions Through Literature*, the author sets out:

> to show the sociality of emotions by making reference to a specific mode of communication (narratives) and by choosing fictional accounts as artificial constructs, supposedly capable of shedding new light on the complex relation on the individual (and his emotionality) and the social structure. (p. 16)

The overview of how sociology perceives emotions in chapter 2 is useful for the cognitive literary scholar who essentially draws on psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience to have an informed opinion of emotions and their brain mechanisms. Mariano Longo gives us a crash course in the sociology of emotions by summoning key figures in the field like Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Charles Horton Cooley, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Florian Znaniecki, Doyle McCarthy, Theodore D. Kemper, Arlie Russel Hochschild, to name a few. Emotions have been analysed in turn as social facts, an instrument of social control, a social force, an aspect of communication, an integrative or synergetic agent, a drive for social unrest, *inter alia*. In essence, sociological approaches to emotions fall into:

> two main trends … up to the present day: the positivist (or organicist) and the constructivist (or culturalist). In a paper published in 1981, Kemper (1981) clarifies what he means by positivist and constructivist approaches. Positivists (including he himself) consider emotions as the output of a biological and psychological substratum which should not be denied, as constructivists do. Positivist approaches are predictive, as they can foresee which emotion will emerge given a specific relational setting, connected to status and power, whereas constructivists are much vaguer, relating

> emotions to cultural factors, such as emotional rules or the reflexive capacity the actor has to define the situation. (p. 42)

In other words, positivists stress the universal physiology of emotions while constructivists see emotions as specific interactional responses to the environment.

Chapter 3 offers a historical survey of emotions, construed as dynamic entities which can either morph over time or – I might add here an omitted element – fall into oblivion such as Roman *misericordia.* [2] As a result of recent research into the history of emotions,

> [a] new conception of affectivity [has emerged] in the social sciences, by which emotions are no longer conceived of as a universal, genetically determined component of a person's biological make-up, but are rather understood as the output of complex and interconnected processes (social, cultural, psychological), in which time and social change play a relevant role. (p. 46)

The historiography of emotions explores the effect of time on emotions and reveals surprising finds such as the fact that emotional control was also a feature of medieval times or that 'the Victorian Age saw a strong gender differentiation of emotions' (p. 64). There seems to have been a bidirectional process by which 'emotions are moulded by historical processes and are, at the same time, able to produce historical changes' (p. 47). The contributions of Norbert Elias and William M. Reddy are being discussed at great length in a nature/culture dialectics.

The next chapter entitled 'Emotions and literature' is the one which has drawn my attention to *Emotions Through Literature: Fictional Narratives, Society and the Emotional Self.* It starts with a discussion of the oft-cited 'paradox of fiction' which Longo sees as 'a specific variation of a long-established philosophical debate on the truth value of literary accounts' (p. 66). There are basically two stances which are a bit muddled in this chapter (possibly due to some word omission). Either you believe that literature makes reference to the real-life world, in which case fiction has cognitive value and contains propositional knowledge (i.e., justified true beliefs), or literature doesn't and solipsistically refers to its own linguistically created universe, in which case it becomes challenging to argue for fiction's cognitive value. Bringing added confusion to the philosophical debate, Mariano Longo contextualises it as follows:

> The paradox is strongly rooted *in a referential conception* of language and representation and derives its consistency from a highly cognitive interpretation of emotions, according to which the reader or beholder should believe in the actuality of what he is experiencing. (p. 66, italics mine)

It seems to me that the paradox of fiction only exists in a *non-referential* conception of language. In other words, it is only because readers are moved about a fictional entity which – they know – cannot refer to any person in our real life world that their behaviour comes

across as paradoxical. I have already discussed this paradox in *La séduction de la fiction* (Vernay, 2019) in the light of the cognitive theory of emotions and have pointed out a few inaccuracies related to the way emotions ought to be considered. Initially, the paradox which was encapsulated in 1975 by Colin Radford's simple question, 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?' [3] is shrouded in vagueness. The use of 'we' indicates that all readers would feel the same if placed in exactly the same circumstances, which is incorrect. The verb 'moved' denotes emotions, which traditionally fall into two categories: emotions with objects and objectless emotions. [4] If emotions are deprived of objects, like euphoria or anxiety, then it proves that you can experience an emotion regardless of the necessity of having to believe in a related object. Therefore, the major misconception is that 'Radford considers belief in the existence of an object as an essential condition of our emotional involvement' (p. 67). However, Mariano Longo overlooks this crucial aspect and reviews the various theorists who have attempted to explain this paradox: Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, Peter Lamarque and Noël Carroll. All these elaborate musings are eventually deflated by Normal Holland's proposed neuropsychological view:

> [emotions] originate in regions of the brain earlier evolutionarily and physically below and within the frontal lobes. That is why we can feel real emotions toward unreal fictions: two different brain systems are at work. One, the prefrontal cortex's systems for action, is at rest, because we know (perhaps in our dorsolateral frontal lobes) that we are not supposed to act in response to the fiction we are reading or the drama we are watching. Those regions of our frontal lobes would ordinarily respond to data about the external world from our senses with plans for action, including testing the reality of the situation. But we know this is "only a story". We therefore cease to test reality, and we do not disbelieve the fiction. The other, the corticolimbic projections back and forth from our limbic system to the orbitofrontal part of the forebrain (the evolutionarily early ventromesial frontal lobes) enable us to feel emotions and the personal importance to us of what we are sensing. Hence, *as we watch or imagine fictional human situations, we feel the same emotions we would feel in reality at those situations*… In effect, when we are experiencing fiction, that dual mammalian system disregards belief or disbelief, and we experience this astonishing phenomenon of real emotions toward people and situations that we know perfectly well are imaginary. [5]

The next step is to find out if these legitimate emotions are a separate kind, to be distinguished as 'quasi-emotions' (Kendall Walton), 'fictional emotions' (p. 71), or 'Literary emotions' (p. 71), from real-life emotions. In an attempt to solve this problem, Marco Sperduti and his team of researchers logically posit a mechanism of 'emotional regulation which accounts for the lesser intensity of emotional response to fiction' (p. 71). In other words, the reduction of emotional intensity is directly correlated to one's awareness of the fictionality of the story that is being consumed. This hypothesis would support the idea that there is no reason to seek alternative labels like 'quasi-emotions' or 'fictional emotions' to describe emotions felt in the literary reception process.

Although emotions for objects are more content-focused than form-focused, Mariano Longo discusses Donald Wesling's idea that creative writers are still able to elicit emotions in readers through the mastery of their rhetorical craft: 'literary works do not simply reproduce emotions, they represent them within the artificiality of stylistic devices. It is the very writing of literature (characterised as it is by tropes and artifice) that allows the transformation of ordinary emotions into literary ones' (p. 73). The whole act of reading literary fiction then provides an opportunity to 'rehearse, as it were, our emotional competence' (p. 73). Put otherwise, fiction becomes, in Keith Oatley's words, 'the mind's flight simulator'. [6]

It goes without saying that 'literary narratives are particularly fit to reproduce and elicit emotions' (p. 75). In real life, emotions – unlike thoughts – can generally be made visible through body cues. However, on the page, they can be made transparent – like thoughts – to the reader as the characters have minds that become transparent to the readers, following Dorrit Cohn's thesis in *Transparent Minds. Narrative Methods for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978). Among the strategies creative writers could implement to give readers access to the interior landscape, to create this 'landscape of consciousness', [7] we have the use of an omniscient narrator, if not of quoted or narrated monologue. The external one, which is more accessible to human beings in real life, is known as the 'landscape of *action*' (see Jerome Bruner's notion of dual landscape). Through the magic of literary craftsmanship, 'imaginative empathy' (p. 76) is one of these reproduced emotions that suddenly becomes transparent to readers in fiction. Given that emotions are culturally inflected and 'acquire meaning within a culturally defined set of contextual references' (p. 79), readers' emotional responses will vary from one person to another, in addition to the fact that emotions also 'emerge in a process of evaluation of the environment' (p. 83). In this respect, a Darwinian perspective would perceive emotions as 'evolutionary resources for adapting to the environment' (p. 83). Transposed to our modern era, the environment becomes the societal context in which we live. Therefore, by representing sociality and its environment, fiction is 'a way to recreate our conception of ourselves, of our emotions and of our relational world' (p. 85).

The last 4 chapters are written following the footsteps of Lewis Coser's *Sociology Through Literature* (1963). Mariano Longo investigates literary fiction which he seems to discuss in a referential conception of language and representation because his analyses of fiction and characters almost appear to be exemplars of real life sociological case studies, whether he is commenting on the works by Philip Roth or Émile Zola, Milton, Shakespeare, Dickens, Verga, Larsen and the like. The sociality of emotions, social control, the emotional crowd, courtly love, are all tackled as artistic representations of life whose verisimilitude passes as a literary feat. What clearly transpires from this book is that literature is tackled from a sociological point of view. As a consequence, the themes, plots and characters are explored at great length. However, do not expect to find any stylistically-informed analyses or narratological insight. While the sociological approach is legitimate insofar as literature is adept at creating simulation models of life, it could be extremely pertinent to make use of this

type of reading to show how some advocacy writers exercise emotional control over their readers to win them over to their cause. This, I believe, is the true sociological dimension of literature, when the text itself becomes an instrument of social control.

Notes

[1] I have myself contributed to this conversation with Vernay, J. (2016). *The seduction of fiction: A plea for putting emotions back into literary interpretation* (C. Lee, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] "La *misericordia* romaine, faite d'apitoiement et de compassion, entre dans cette catégorie des émotions qui n'ont plus d'exact équivalent moderne, car les manières de les montrer n'existent plus". (Roman *misericordia*, a blend of pity and compassion, falls into that category of emotions which no longer have a specific modern counterpart, because the ways to express them no longer exist). Rey, S (2018). La *misericordia* romaine. Un mouvement perdu in Quentin Deluermoz, Hervé Mazurel, Clémentine Vidal-Naquet. (eds.), « Controverses sur l'émotion : neurosciences et sciences humaines » *Sensibilités. Histoire, critique & sciences sociales* 5, 125.

[3] The paradox couched by Colin Radford (pp. 67-80) is the first article followed by Michael Weston's response (pp. 82-93). They were published as companion essays in Radford, C. & Weston, M. (1975). How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina? *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, *49*(1), 67-94.

[4] The objectless emotions category is unfortunately overlooked by Mariano Longo for whom 'emotions are always about an object' (p. 82).

[5] Holland, N.N. (2004). The power (?) of literature: A Neuropsychological view. *New Literary History*, *35*(3), 395-410.

[6] 'If one learns to fly, it may be a good idea to spend time in a flight simulator. A prediction of the hypothesis that fictions are typically simulations of the social world, therefore, is that people who spend time reading them will become more socially skilled than people who read non-fiction'. Oatley, K. (2008). The mind's flight simulator. *The Psychologist*, *21*(12), 1030. See also Mariano Longo's *Emotions Through Literature: Fictional Narratives, Society and the Emotional Self*. p. 84.

[7] 'Another word, then, about Agents. Narrative, even at its most primitive, is played out on a dual landscape, to use Greimas's celebrated expression (Greimas and Courtes, 1976). There is a landscape of *action* on which events unfold. Grendel wreaks destruction on the drinking hall and upon its celebrating warriors in *Beowulf*. But there is a second landscape, a landscape of consciousness, the inner worlds of the protagonists involved in the action'. Bruner, J. (2004). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, *71*(3), 698.

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Australia-based scholar Jean-François Vernay holds a French accreditation to supervise research (HDR). He publishes both in French and in English. Among the latest of his five authored monographs are The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation *(Palgrave, 2016) whose Arabic edition has just been released,* La séduction de la fiction *(Hermann, 2019), and* Neurocognitive Interpretations of Australian Literature: Criticism in the Age of Neuroawareness *(Routledge, 2021). The Korean edition of* A Brief Take on the Australian Novel *(Wakefield Press, 2016) is forthcoming.*

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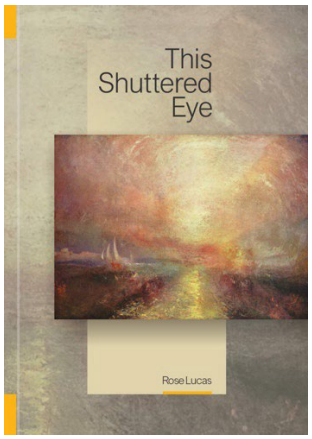
TEXT review

Voicing mutedness

review by Dominique Hecq



Rose Lucas
This Shuttered Eye
Liquid Amber Press, Seddon VIC, 2021
ISBN 780645 044928
Pb 97pp AUD24.00

With a painter's deft touch inseparable from an awareness that every brush stroke matters, Rose Lucas's *This Shuttered Eye* is a masterclass in the use of telling detail. The eye in the title of the collection looks 'into the texture of the seen' (p. 13), seeking 'deep shades' and how these are in turn captured by the looker's 'shuttered' gaze, creating a haze between the visible and the invisible. Here the eye is akin to a camera that reveals both *studium* and *punctum* in a picture [1]. But here the eye also unshutters the outer and inner worlds as these are filtered through experience and in the process of writing.

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General editor: Nigel Krauth. Reviews editor: Dominic Symes. Assistant reviews editor: Simon-Peter Telford

This Shuttered Eye is in three parts. The first, 'The Long Gallery', focuses on ekphrastic poems – ekphrasis being, in Leo Spitzer's definition: 'the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Théophile Gautier, "*une transposition d'art*"' (1962, p. 72). The second section, 'Habitation', explores the relationship between world, body and word, offering poems of notional ekphrasis whereby poems conjure up imagined paintings that depict outer and inner landscapes with a lush palette. The third, 'Homing', examines 'a texture / a geography of dislocation' (p. 86) to speak of loss and grief and desire, gesturing towards new departures.

The collection marks a transition and taking stock between *Unexpected Clearing* (2016) and, I speculate from reading 'The Hum of Angophora', Lucas's forthcoming book titled *Increments of the Everyday*. In many ways, it also extends the ekphrastic spectrum from a direct engagement with the pictorial or sculptural to the imagined and what I would call pictorially felt. Here ekphrasis is a collaboration between sister arts, a 'genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic "others"' that are not 'rival, alien modes of representation' (Mitchell, 1994, p. 156). On the contrary. Ambling through this volume, I get the sense that all visual description is ekphrastic to the extent that it translates what Wordsworth once called 'the tyranny of the eye' into language.

The opening poem, 'Travelling the Long Gallery', functions like a prologue. It sets the tone and announces the theme of the collection, emphasising as it does the intermeshing of the textual, textural and visual:

> where paint presses on the contused skin of the visible
> etched
> on the cross-hatched surface
> of this shuttered eye. (p. 13)

This intermeshing recurs throughout the collection. Consider, for example the ending of 'Cloud and Owl: Bush Landscape', after Fred Williams 1965-6, where the textual is also aural:

> eggshell membrane when
> a whoop of throaty voice
>
> reverberates
> across ridges of indigo
>
> slip – night's hypnotic
> luscious plane
>
> rippling through
> the textured canvas of our listening air (p. 22)

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The poems in this section stand alone without need of the artwork that inspired it, and reading them is as enriching as visiting a gallery, a feast of all the senses which takes the reader across countries, art forms, movements and styles as well as perspectives. The poems contrast as wildly as the artefacts themselves, every one containing a sensitively observed facet of the human heart and its 'obscured chambers' (p. 50). They sweep through the MacDonnell Ranges in Central Australia to dreary Ballarat Road in Footscray, ancient Rome to twenty-first century Wales, through dialogue with works by Walter Sickert, Antoon Van Dyck, Albert Namatjira, Baby Guerrilla, William Turner, Fred Williams, Ovid, Paul Bailey, and Edward Hopper. In these ekphrastic poems, there are instances where the aesthetic 'subjects' are aware of the viewer capturing the moment or even speak out, addressing the painter, as is the case in 'Namatjira's Ghost Gums' (p. 18).

'Habitation', the second section of the collection is sensuous and sensual, concerned as it is with how the body inhabits place. It ranges from impressionistic lyrics to vivid collages in a travelling movement from Australia and Tasmania to Scotland to Vermont, US. The first poem, 'Poetry and Breathing', about the writing process, invites the air – and also the reader – into this bodily place with grace and reverence:

> the cool air I invite into the habitation of my body
> its invisible conduits
>
> the welcome tide of bright blood and spark
> of neuron
>
> that searches me out
> washing me in the salty pathways of life (pp. 28-29)

In this middle section, life and work and friendship intertwine through peripatetic and centrifugal patterns, creating self-reflexive compositions and poignant images. 'Milton Avery Paints Vermont' from the sequence titled 'Vermont Collage', for example, is an exemplar of Rose Lucas's method of painting textures that infuse images with emotions with a sure palette.

'Homing' signals a different tone. Different mood. The pace slows in meditations about loss and grief remembered ('Not long before you were born, I dreamed', pp. 74-75; 'Corridor', pp. 77-78) or anticipated ('Foreshadowing', p. 76), and in meditations about war ('Walt Whitman in Hospitals of the Civil War', pp. 88-90 and 'Crossing Darwin Harbour', pp. 79-89) which resonate uncannily as some of us wonder if the third world war is about to break out. There is also a beautiful elegy to Eurydice Dixon, who, coming back from a gig on a night in June 2018, was callously murdered in an inner suburban Melbourne park. This is a stark ekphrastic poem where Gluck's aria 'What will I do without Eurydice?' poignantly echoes, ending with the incantation: '*Rispondi*' (p. 93), whose response will never come, of course.

But ‘Homing’ is also about the return of desire. The last two poems, ‘Cat’s Cradle’ (p. 94) and ‘There is a Tree’ (pp. 96-97), are cases in point. They work as ekphrastic allegories, as translations, carrying over from one sign system or discourse to another. They are ‘transpositions of art’ at one remove, with the landscape’s own aura, lingering at the end of this imaginary felt poetic gallery:

> by the breathing of the treed world
> open hands fingers voice
>
> wide weave of twine and
> touch unthreading
>
> filigree root texture of bark a seed ready
> now cracking in fire (p. 97)

The breath. The voice. Arise again through Rose Lucas’s expanding ekphrastic spectrum. In *This Shuttered Eye*, the muteness, and sometimes invisibility of the visual, comes alive in the textural and textual. Autobiographical silences want to be spoken. The silences of history also want to be heard; just as landscapes and cultural images want to be translated.

Notes

[1] Roland Barthes’s terms *studium* and *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (1981) refer on the one hand to the ‘polite interest’ of a visual artefact (p. 27) and on the other hand to the unique disturbing ‘detail’ (p. 42).

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Smacked & other stories of addiction *is fresh off the press. A reprint of* After Cage *is slated for June 2022.*

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TEXT review

‘Without your gaze, I am nothing’

review by Eleanore Gardner

Richard James Allen
More Lies
Interactive Press, Carindale QLD 2021
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By the final pages of Richard James Allen’s debut novel, *More Lies*, the reader is no closer to discovering the truth about the unnamed narrator’s wild story, but such ambiguity is exactly the point. ‘The truth is,’ our notoriously unreliable protagonist confesses, ‘I need you to hear me, to see me’ (p. 53) and it is a powerful request. Allen asks his readers to fulfil their basic, most intrinsic role of giving life to a text. If, as German literary scholar Wolfgang

Iser contends, 'it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism' (1972, p. 280), then *More Lies* is as vibrant and as engaging as they come.

What begins as a parodic noir-thriller quickly transforms into a genre-bending narrative that challenges many preconceived notions of style and literary trope. The immediacy of the story is apparent; the narrator writes each chapter while being held hostage by a gangster and *femme fatale*, both of whom are involved in a plot to assassinate a visiting president. Stricklandson, Allen's resident *femme*, is a wonderful caricature of the stereotype, equipped with 'the most incredibly golden hair ... the sharpest little teeth' (p. 6) and a rampant sex compulsion: 'it appears that she wants to make love to me right here and now while I keep typing' (p. 6). Her encouragements to 'keep writing, oh do keep writing, dear' (p. 1) conjure up images of the sadistic Annie Wilkes from Stephen King's classic, *Misery* (1987), making Allen's earlier likening of her to Lauren Becall even more purposeful [1]. This is one of many intertextual references that situates the novel as inherently self-aware and playfully critical of the crime-fiction genre itself:

> Who's going to believe a lot of hooey about bombshell blondes with golden guns speaking in foreign languages, evil villains deeply attached to their scheming mothers, and a failed assassination attempt on some dodgy visiting president, who is by now probably on a plane to who knows where? (p. 23)

Avid readers of detective fiction, James Bond thrillers or classic whodunits will find this an amusing question, for the answer is both *no one* and *everyone*. Crime-thriller fiction, like many genres, is known for its conventions, tropes, and (at times) unrealistic plot points, but these elements remain an integral part of its appeal. When it is revealed that Stricklandson and the gangster, Peters, are the narrator's siblings, it becomes evidently clear that this is not going to be a familiar story.

As a reader of *More Lies*, it was thrilling to be thrown into the discomfort of the narrator's unreliability: 'why should you believe me? – all I can say at present is that I want you to know that I have your very best interests at heart' (p. 47). Unlike in the cases of Patrick Bateman, Humbert Humbert, and Amy Dunne, the narrator is immediately exposed as deceptive, which makes for a fun and compelling journey. They are capable of challenging binaries in their existence as both victim and perpetrator, liar and truthteller, man and woman: 'Didn't I tell you I'm a woman ... I know you had me pegged as a dick all this time' (p. 43). Amusingly, they have the unquestioned sex appeal of classic crime-fiction heroes like James Bond, Jack Reacher, and Mikael Blomkvist, yet readers know nothing of their appearance. While Allen clearly parodies the conventions of various crime-fictions, his philosophical and introspective writing challenges the notion that crime-fiction is an inferior, non-literary genre.

The novel shifts between the present moment (in which our 'faithful narrator' [p. 3] writes the very words of *More Lies*) and the protagonist's philosophical asides, stream-of-

consciousness musings. Allen's own background in the creative arts as a poet, filmmaker, dancer, and actor adds a rich layer of complexity to the novel. Its history as a performance piece is evident in chapters like 'Freeze-Frame' where our clever narrator 'suspend[s] time for an instant ... a classic storytelling device' (p. 13), or in 'The Road to Utopia', 'Blackout' and 'The Homeless' where they unexpectedly start reciting poetry. Originally published in 2013, 'The Road to Utopia' has an urgency that parallels that of the novel: 'backstage / go backstage / draw the curtains / turn out the spotlights / take off your make-up / & turn back into a pumpkin / jump into a television / & ask the actors who they really are' (p. 8). As Allen reveals, the road to Utopia is futile, even absurd, yet the truth is just as elusive, so it is no wonder that the line between author and narrator begins to blur:

> Better get used to it. I'll be dropping these things in every now and then, in fact whenever I can and feel like it, like songs or dance numbers in an MGM musical. How the hell else is a person supposed to get their old material out of the bottom drawer and published, if not by slipping it into any spare space that catches their eye, especially their own memoirs, for Chrissake! (p. 11)

This passage holds new meaning when considering the novel's paratexts, particularly the acknowledgements page, where Allen reveals that 'for reasons now forgotten, the manuscript went into the bottom drawer' (p. vi) before resurfacing a decade later. Literary theorist Gérard Genette describes a novel's paratexts as those 'accompanying productions' such as an 'author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations' (1997, p. 1) that exist in 'an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary' (p. 2). *More Lies* brilliantly capitalises on these external elements. First impressions of the dedication, for example – *for Money* (p. v) – may result in the reader's confusion, but this is soon satisfyingly resolved when the narrator's precarious position reveals itself. Even the novel's front and back covers feature Allen entangled in a blue crime-scene sheet on asphalt with limbs flailing, having seemingly taken his own advice on the road to Utopia: 'turn yourself inside out / & jump off the Empire State Building / screaming / I'M SUPERMAN / & FLY' (p. 10). The liminal spaces between paratext and narrative, author and narrator, truth and untruth make for a remarkably ambiguous reading experience, one that may not appeal to everyone.

As noted, though, the objective of *More Lies* is not to be a 'likeable' or true text: 'The truth is never enough. Or it's unlikeable. I know I don't like it. Who could ever like the truth, all those sordid details?' (p. 52). While the novel's origins can be traced back to the 1980s, its relevance in this current era of misinformation and political turmoil cannot be overstated. The truth is uncomfortable, hence Allen's decision to parody its importance. 'Don't you know that there is no story?' readers are warned in a rare moment of truth-telling, but even this is false, for Allen is telling us many stories, each capable of existing on their own and as a collective. 'I am the story,' the narrator says, 'don't ask me if I am true' (p. 54). Allen directly confronts and shatters the expectations of readers and audiences, and in doing so,

creates a space where they must learn to be comfortable with the unknown. In 'Story Story' readers are asked, 'Is there something you want me to say? Is there something you expect me to say?' (p. 18), and it is a provocative question. How can genre-fiction authors balance conformance to and transgression of conventions in a way that readers will accept? This is unimportant to Allen and the narrator, for 'It doesn't really matter what I am saying, so long as I have your attention... For all of this long and winding road you have allowed me to exist' (p. 53).

The reader's involvement in the narrator's escapades only deepens as they become a detective in a novel that refuses to cooperate. In what is a hilariously absurd moment in an already chaotic narrative, the narrator encourages readers to write a signed confession in the novel's very pages: 'I knew I could count on your cooperation. Now, don't forget, everything you have written will remain strictly between ourselves' (50). We are, quite literally, 'filling in the gaps left by the text itself' (Iser, 1972, p. 285) and it is an ingenious metaphor for the inconsistent and fragmented plot, one that readers must piece together themselves.

There are many moments of great beauty and clarity in *More Lies* that cut through the chaotic, turbulent narrative. Such chapters include Part Two of 'Down Memory Lane' as Allen interweaves musical metaphors with family history, and '...If I Can Remember It', a soliloquy on truth. While only fifty-eight pages in length, the novel is simultaneously challenging, confusing, frustrating, exciting, and most importantly, entertaining. If I am being honest – or can you believe me? – I can't quite shake the feeling post-reread that I am being watched: 'Who's to say I haven't been monitoring you ever since you picked up this God damn book? Now you didn't think of that, did you?' (p. 46). I suppose I will never know.

Notes

[1] Bacall stars in the 1990 film adaptation of King's novel as Paul's literary agent who tries to convince him to write a novel about his traumatic experience.

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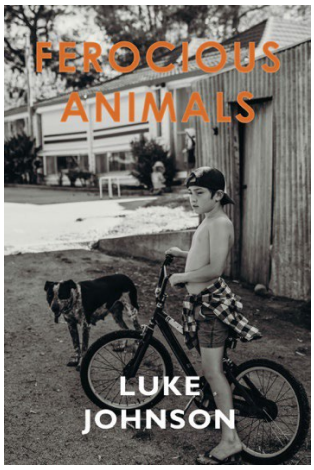
A thing or two about collisions

review by Shannon Sandford



Luke Johnson
Ferocious Animals
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After their train comes to an unexpected and screeching halt, a man and woman trade theories about the cause of the commotion. When the man asks if she thinks they might have hit something, the woman mocks him, '*Maybe* we hit something, he says. *Ha!* I thought you were supposed to know a thing or two about collisions' (p. 18).

Luke Johnson's debut collection, *Ferocious Animals*, explores Australia and Australian national identity in all of its complexities and contradictions. It comprises thirteen short

stories that embroil deeply flawed characters in tragic circumstances of loss and grief, sexual violence, neglect, abuse and infidelity while offering rare glimpses of compassion and tenderness. Through narration that activates the vulnerabilities of childhood, the turbulence of adolescence, and the dysfunction of adulthood, Johnson weaves compelling stories that explore innocence, indecency, and the generative spaces between, in prose that is equal parts delicate and brutal. At its heart, *Ferocious Animals* is a collection compiled under a framework of collisions, where the bright euphoria of human joy, connection, and intimacy meets and intersects with darker revelations of what horrors humans can inflict on one another.

This collection reflects and responds to a robust tendency in contemporary Australian short fiction to explore the intricacies of the human condition through multiple angles and perspectives. Murray Middleton's *When There's Nowhere Else to Run* (2016), captures the humanity in desperation through a range of voices and characters who seek refuge, seclusion, and vindication from past discretions. *Jungle Without Water and Other Stories* (2017) by Sreedhevi Iyer delves into the shifting boundaries of belonging, suspicion, and apathy that dictate lived experience of diaspora in Australia. Mihaela Nicolescu and Nadine Browne's combined anthology *The Whip Hand* (2016) illuminates the complexities of the everyday through characters living on the outermost edges of society and in precarious states of deep loneliness and despair. These collections represent only a small fraction of the recent groundswell of confident and refined short-form fiction that sit somewhat uncomfortably between the familiar and foreign to deliver startling home truths.

Like these authors, Johnson works at the liminal edges of place and time, deploying characters with varying motivations and aspirations and, ultimately, revealing what lurks beneath the artifice of our humanity. *Ferocious Animals* plays with notions of optimism and morality commonly associated with its primary setting in quasi-outback suburbia while centring complex, contradictory, and fascinating characters who prove the antithesis of these ideals. The title is an apt precursor to stories which extol civility and care alongside depravity and ruthlessness as twinned aspects of human/nature. The story 'The Names of Dead Horses' (quoted above) signals the rich, complex meaning to be pulled from this finely crafted prose, as the inciting incident gives way to explorations of deep histories and past ghosts that collide with contemporary presumptions of masculinity. Collision denotes a productive lens for the themes and style in this collection – a lens that encompasses not only juxtaposition or contrast but offers wider scope for examining the constellation of contexts, characters and scenes that interact and intersect, merge and overlay, under Johnson's skilled hand.

Regional Australia – as a site and a symbol of Australiana – is a powerful backdrop for stories that emphasise the core ideological and cultural forces of our nation. Quotidian scenes depicting local footy rivalries, family camping trips, schoolyard antics, farm life, and fishing expeditions strike strong associations with small-town Australia that shapes and is shaped by long-established traditions and histories. The story, 'Bass Minx', for example, effectively amplifies certain connotations of the pub in its portrayal of the local nightlife from the

perspective of Kat, an almost-broke cashier struggling to move on from an abusive relationship:

> There are five pubs in this shit town. Three of them are shit and two of them are okay but still pretty shit depending on how many people are there. The one they're going to is located at the bottom end of the main street, opposite Video Ezy. It's called the Colonial and has a picture of a windmill on it. It didn't used to cost anything to get in on a Saturday night, but since everyone started going to the Statey first and then showing up to the Colonial afterwards, it now costs five bucks to get in if you arrive after nine, which is bullshit. (pp. 145–6)

Johnson's representation of Australian public bars is both familiar and loaded, not only drawing from intrinsic cultural values of mateship, egalitarianism, and larrikinism, but as the authors of *Myths of Oz* observe, carrying an association with alcoholism and addiction that has long invited national pride and shame (Fiske et al., 1987/2017, p. 1). Fiske, Hodge and Turner pay particular attention to the pub in one chapter of their influential *Myths of Oz*, where it is framed as a gathering place both central and ubiquitous to domestic life – 'a home away from home' (1987/2017, p. 5). *Ferocious Animals* engages with the distinct iconicity of the Australian landscape and quintessential markers of national identity in stories that occasionally push out from realism yet are undeniably steeped in the mundane.

Alongside the pub, backyard pools, farmhouses, suburban streets and the Riverland serve rhetorical and expressive functions in Johnson's writing, evoking emotional and symbolic features of place. E.V. Walter's work on the subjective dimensions of place is useful here, particularly, his definition of place as 'a concrete milieu and an expressive universe within specific social and physical boundaries, with a location in psychical space and time and an identity' (1988, p. 143). For Walter, places can be 'seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, revered, enjoyed, or avoided' (1988, p. 142). A visceral sense of place is perhaps the most compelling and salient feature of *Ferocious Animals*: by evoking an imaginary experience of the past through nostalgic reference to a specific, yet unspecified, period of time, Johnson presents readers with a world that feels familiar in its foundations.

That is, Johnson crafts emotionally affective, intimate stories that nurture a wistful longing for the ways we used to live. A time uncomplicated by the various modes, profiles, platforms and technologies now used to constitute ourselves and contextualise our lives in modernity. In a world set ostensibly in the remote past, nostalgia presents a particular rhetorical position from which to assert a cultural identity. References to phone booths, post offices, landlines, and VideoEzy stores cultivate a powerful sense of sentimentality for the 'simple life' and the regional middle-class experience. However, Johnson takes care to mitigate this nostalgic vision with explorations of the abject human condition and the human potential for brutality. The phone booth is 'covered in graffiti', its receiver 'blackened and partly misshapen at the ear end from where somebody had held a lighter to it' (p. 36). The VideoEzy is located on

the main street of town, full of 'P-platers sitting on the bonnets of their cars', blaring some monotonous, forgettable dance song (p. 145).

This representation of nostalgia recalls the Greek epistemology of word: painful homecoming. Stories framed by wholesome traditions of ordinary, domestic life expand under Johnson's treatment to bring the darker realities of the present day into the picture. For example, the titular story, 'Ferocious Animals', first published in *Griffith Review*, centres on a family's preparations for a local football grand-final, which are disrupted by an unwanted visitor. The trappings of quiet domesticity (a mother cooking a fried breakfast) and Saturday morning sports rituals (a father and son wearing matching jerseys) elicit a potent nostalgic tone – one that is, at the same time, permeated with the threat of violence culminating in a tense standoff with the unknown driver of an old yellow Falcon.

By illustrating the minutiae of the everyday which render shocking heartache, grief, and loss as intensely palpable, Johnson deftly captures short story fiction at its most affecting. These stories are profound in their ordinariness and promote an understanding of life as lived through complexities, contradictions, and collisions. Each one is distinctly memorable, yet this interior world features a breadth of characters that are all wounded, failing, in need of compassion, that read as if existing in the same town, the same neighbourhood. As 'Bass Minx' tumbles into 'A Gift Unwrapped' and 'Serious Things', readers follow young women who are disenfranchised by the power-dynamics of their relationships and cast a vision of the depth of human need and desperation. Notions of the nuclear family illustrated in 'Ferocious Animals' are exploded in 'Matrimonial Property' where betrayal and infidelity begin a rippling effect of emotional wreckage. While the stories in *Ferocious Animals* appear fractured, even discontinuous, they form part of an evolving, layered collection that follows a common thread for the intricacies and disparities of lived experience. Such is the meticulous and essential craft of narrative structure, according to Glenda Adams:

> Structure is a tremendously emotional part of the story. It's not just a framework that you hang your subject matter on, like washing on the line; it is integral to the emotion of the story, so if you find the right *shape* for your story, whatever it is, it will add to it. (as cited in Hodgins, 2001, p. 151)

The *shape* of this collection evokes the rhythms and energies of the most effective short-form writing: Johnson delicately weaves the banal with the precarious in stories which leave their resolution for the reader to determine. His work proves the fine art of storytelling with intimation rather than in absolutes and, for the most part, manages a deft balance between building suspense and burying the lead. 'When We Were Eight Together' might edge on predictability, for it premises a common narrative trope for childhood grief and loss; however, other stories succeed in holding readers in tense anticipation of a climactic, though not always revelatory, moment. 'The Conditional Past' tracks a game of hide-and-seek between siblings Jessie, Cam, and Robbie that begins, 'It would have started the usual way, with a squabble over who got first go at hiding and who had to count' (p. 73). The repetition of the past-tense

modal, which in grammatical terms denotes a lost opportunity, here offers glimpses of an unstoppable tragedy that is both gut-wrenching and captivating. From the first 'would have', readers are immersed in a vivid, gripping plot that, as it unfolds, fosters our expectations for catastrophe while still managing to surprise and confound in what is left unsaid.

Ferocious Animals fulfils the promise of the best Australian fiction to tunnel into the core of national identity to expose the powerlessness of the individual within the harshness of the social environment. The effect is a uniquely composite image of a not-so-past world transmuted in stories that subvert class, ideology and identity to interrogate intrinsic aspects of our Australian way of life. Johnson's attention to craft and lyrically restrained prose makes *Ferocious Animals* an excellent fit for Recent Work Press, an Australian small-press imprint that specialises primarily in poetry and short textual works. The distinction of this collection is self-evident, as select stories have featured in Australian literary journals such as *Island* ('When We Were Eight Together'), *Westerly* ('The Names of Dead Horses'), *Southerly* ('The Conditional Past') and *Overland* ('The Secret Spot'), among others.

The world of *Ferocious Animals* is not black and white. Its characters cannot be bundled into common tropes of heroic protagonists or evil villains and, crucially, readers are not asked to judge or condemn them. What this collection *does* offer is an understanding of humans as intensely and expectedly fallible – people who are impulsive, selfish, vain, and violent, who often live with deep regret and heartache. Johnson fundamentally emphasises the collisions and interconnectedness evident in a world that is heaving with pain and loss, but also great beauty and wisdom, wherein each life is twisted and intertwined. The nuanced pathos of *Ferocious Animals* is perhaps summarised in 'The Secret Spot' (the conclusion to the collection), in the campfire stories told to a boy by his father: 'There are lessons in these stories, and the lessons seem to Anthony as familiar as the stories, which are familiar to the point of being visibly worn through' (p. 208).

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