TEXT Vol 5 No 2 (October 2001)

Reviews contents

The World According To Disher

review by Kevin Brophy

Writing Fiction: An Introduction to the Craft
Garry Disher
Allen & Unwin 2001
217pp, $19.95
ISBN 1-86508-589-8

This is a compact, intelligent, plainly written and well organised account of the elements of the craft of writing fiction. You could put it safely in any would-be writer's hands; even for an experienced writer it could act as a healthy reminder of the lessons hard won in experience and sometimes slowly forgotten as habits harden. It is a little dry, but after all it is a manual, addressing technical matters for those owners of pens and keyboards who want to put them to this particular use.

Garry Disher is himself an eminent and productive writer across the fields of literary fiction, genre fiction and young adult fiction, so he is well qualified to write from experience.

One of the strangenesses of books on writing fiction is the way that each one is written as if there are not whole libraries full of similar manuals out there, and a constant stream of new ones coming along. All of them deal with much the same set of issues. Whether it is the manual by Kate Grenville, John Marsden, Garry Disher or Carmel Bird does not matter much in the end because they will all give similar advice (though differently packaged).

One of the certainties attached to these manuals is that they will not make you a writer if that is what you hope to become. What they can do is show you broadly some of the things you will learn if you keep writing and thinking about writing. They can reveal the barriers to competence which can make writing such a long apprenticeship. For the beginning-writer who is attentive and canny about the task at hand a manual such as this can speed the process of learning so that a high level of competence is reached sooner.

One of the constant reservations I have about writing manuals is their relentless focus on 'realist' writing. Realist fiction lends itself most easily to discussion of craft. Garry Disher's book is pleasingly open to other forms of writing, and though his interest is in realist fiction as Virginia Woolf and Henry James defined it, he notes along the way, 'Rather than set out a list of prescriptions, I'll answer by saying what I look for in fiction - recognising many of you will have, or develop, different expectations but also hoping my position might help you clarify your own' (p. 28). Somehow it makes sense to read and study a manual on the craft of creating realist fiction, while it would seem ludicrous to study a manual on how to produce the surreal, the post-modern, the quirky, the elliptical, the poetic or the experimental. One position to adopt in relation to this is to suggest that those other more anarchic and more individual forms take their significance and power from the fact that they are acting in response and resistance to the reader's expectations based on a knowledge of

realist fiction. In other words, the writer must know what she is rebelling against if a rebellion is to be truly effective. Garry Disher does not take up this argument, but throughout the book he is aware that realist fiction is only part of the story of fiction writing. There is for instance a section (three pages) on 'innovative fiction' which acknowledges a history of experiment in fiction and a growing number of writers interested in other ways of writing fiction - ways often dismissed or misunderstood by those expecting more craft (more realism) in their fiction.

An illusion created by how-to-write manuals is that if you pay attention to these methods, suggestions and hints then you will learn to write fiction. But this is not really how it happens. The manual is at best a beginning-point for that other business, the real business of writing. In his much-quoted essay on 'On Writing' Raymond Carver makes this point:

> *The World According to Garp* is, of course, the marvelous world according to John Irving. There is another world according to Flannery O'Connor, and others according to William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. There are worlds according to Cheever, Updike, Singer, Stanley Elkin, Ann Beattie, Cynthia Ozick, Donald Barthelme, Mary Robison, William Kettrridge, Barry Hannah, Ursula K. Le Guin. Every great or even very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications.

No manual can teach this. This can only be learned through enthusiasm for reading and writing, and through that hard work of listening to yourself as you write. The other point Carver is demonstrating here is that you cannot expect to be a writer unless you are a reader. He has come to appreciate what these writers have done. He measures his achievements against theirs. His stories are in their company. This is where Garry Disher's manual on craft is invaluable for any writer or aspiring writer. The text is liberally sprinkled with references to novels and short stories, and in addition there is a usable list of sources at the back of the book. I will be following up Tillie Olsen's story 'I stand here Ironing' and Colette's 'The Other Wife' thanks to his discussion of their particular achievements and points of interest. Disher's introduction to craft is also an introduction to reading.

Rather than being constricting this book's discussion of writing as a craft and reading as a writer can expand your choices. *Writing Fiction* is not after all anything like the car manual in your glovebox or the instruction booklet that came with your sawbench, but a distillation of one writer's experience at remaking the world according to Disher.

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TEXT
Vol 5 No 2 October 2001
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft

review by Gaylene Perry

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft
Stephen King
Hodder & Stoughton, 2000
Pb $17.95rrp 367pp
ISBN 0 340 76998 X

The cover of this paperback - with its gilt lettering and spooky, green-tinged illustration - could be mistaken for the cover of a Stephen King horror novel. This is no accident: thumbnails of the horror novels' covers are reproduced on the inside of the back cover, and the visual presentation is identical for the novels and for this memoir. *On Writing* is clearly marketed at King's large existing readership, and I feel that this needs to be kept in mind when discussing the work.

In the early pages, King writes about having dedicated his book to Amy Tan. They had a conversation about the questions that are not asked of so-called popular writers at festivals and the like. Tan said that she was never asked about language. This apparently inspired King to write his 'memoir of the craft'. King appears to be making a political statement about the treatment of popular writers and about his attempt to address part of that treatment by writing what is, in one sense, a how-to-write book, a book about craft, about language, from the point of view of a commercially popular writer.

Overall, I find *On Writing* to be something of a mishmash. This may be indicative of King's frame of mind (and body) when writing, as he wrote the book during his recuperation from a near-fatal road accident. The memoir reflects on King's path to writing success, although it focuses more strongly on his early years of writing than on his fame in later times. It is also a how-to-write book, with practical advice for aspiring writers. And it is the story of King's accident and how it affected his work. Each of these parts is engaging in its own right, but together in the one book, I found the parts overly fragmentary, going in too many different directions. Perhaps this fracturedness is interesting in itself: in its reflection of the circumstances and persona and usual writing genre of the author.

The postscript treating the accident is the most absorbing section of the book. Throughout the entire text, King maintains a distinctive, character-laden voice, but here, where he has a particular story to tell - a story of events that happened to him, that threatened his life - the writing is most vivid.

> Smith sees I'm awake and tells me help is on the way. He speaks calmly, even cheerily. His look, as he sits on his rock with his cane drawn across his lap, is one of pleasant commiseration: Ain't the two of us just had the shittiest luck? it says. He and Bullet left the campground where they were staying, he later tells an investigator, because he wanted "some of those Marzes-bars they have up to the store." When I hear this little detail some

> weeks later, it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character right out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny. (308)

This enthusiasm is missing in other parts of the book, particularly in the how-to-write sections.

The how-to-write segments are eclectic, impressionistic rather than thorough, and in general lack the animation of the rest of the book. The segments appear to hinge on one main statement: 'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.' The simplicity of this advice picks up on King's Second Foreword:

> This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do - not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad. I figured the shorter the book, the less bullshit. (xiii)

These words contain the first trace of a message that I find recurring throughout the book: that the author does not seem to believe in what he is writing at all points of the work.

I refer back to King's conversation with Amy Tan, and I wonder if he could not have written a more convincing book about craft if he had focused singularly on the genre of memoir without attempting to fuse it with the how-to-write genre. I do believe that those two genres can be meshed, but in this case, the convergence simply has not worked. The parts of the book where King has utilised the tools of storytelling rather than overtly explaining such tools are, in my mind, most lucid.

Readers of King's fiction will no doubt enjoy the rambunctious and irreverent storytelling about his life and his work. Those aspiring writers among them may also find the material to be a sound yet basic introduction to writing and to seeking publication. For other readers, I am not sure that there is much to be found here that could not have been put into a long magazine article, or alternatively, into a longer and more coherent book that evenly maintained the enthusiasm and polish of those sections that most closely resemble fiction writing.

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TEXT
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http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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Finding Theodore and Brina

review by Molly Travers

Finding Theodore and Brina
Terri-ann White
Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001
232pp, $19.95rrp
ISBN 1 86368 337 2

I feel it is presumptuous to review a book written by someone who writes so much better than I do. However, there are two reasons for my interest in *Finding Theodore and Brina*. I am writing a biography of a female ancestor born in 1869. Because of a lack of personal material, I need a structure and style that will make her story interesting to others. I have read widely in search of a model. I have yet to find one. And secondly, I teach mature graduate students who write autobiography that includes family biography, so I read hundreds of attempts to recreate a family portrait gallery. Students look, as one would expect, at faulty memory and family myths and secrets, and follow up sources of information in houses, archives and family interviews. Their reading includes other auto/biographies, history and novels written about the period. They need to consider style and structure, and whether to include themselves, and how much to make up.

These are the writer's concerns. I admire Terri-ann White's varied writing style. I cannot fault it (except for a personal objection to her contemporary use of 'like', now accepted by even the Oxford Dictionary). I am impressed by her inventive structuring of her material, wandering from character to character, away and back again like a haunting musical theme, interspersed with undemanding historical facts and views of contemporary Perth, its early settlement and its attitudes, particularly to the Aborigines, Jews and convicts. Nor does White indulge in the detachment that academics are expected to pretend. I enjoy her fictional recreations of people, their thoughts and details of events in which they are involved, and I appreciate the inclusion of sources for these recreations.

I was interested in the use of often mystifying sub-headings, and what Elizabeth Jolly calls 'sophisticated spaces' between paragraphs. White uses the space after every paragraph, and one paragraph may lead directly on to the next, but not necessarily so. She uses '~' if a more conscious space is indicated. I like the way White includes herself and her own feelings during her tireless searches of archives and interviews in pursuit of her family's secrets of lunacy, poverty, criminality and shameful pregnancy, along with their determination to survive in conditions which White describes in vivid and often repulsive detail. These are my reactions as a writer and teacher of writing.

This comes to my reaction as a reader. I did find the book difficult to persist with, both in style and structure. I was never quite sure where I was. Just as I became involved in one character, we drifted away to another or to general reflections on some question or attitude or fact. Some documentation or invented documentation was repetitive, even if the repetition was part of the tedious or frustrating event. Brina's letters to the authorities about paying to keep her husband in the Lunatic Asylum, are one example; the fictional account of Brina's voyage out from Plymouth in 1852 based on other contemporary diaries is another. I

found the changes in style an interruption, even though I admired that skill and understood the reason. I was certainly left with a hazy picture of Perth in the past, and of a variety of men and women struggling for survival up and down the coast of Western Australia and on the gold fields. Perhaps this is the way it should be. Our conception of the past can only be mysterious, nightmarish or dreamlike, even in our own memories, however sharp we feel them to be. But that doesn't make for satisfying reading; we look for recreations.

As an academic, I am grateful for the Bibliography and the discreet footnotes, and the Appendices with some of the existing documentary evidence. Perhaps I read too many theses, where candidates are exhorted to tell examiners where they're going and where they've been because examiners read under duress, not for pleasure, and don't want to read the entire thesis twice if they can help it. Or perhaps I'm reading too much fictional biography, where the writer wants to give the reader a good story, a good read.

When I had finished the book to the end, including the Acknowledgements and the inner back dust cover listing White's other publications, I felt embarrassed at having found the story so hard to persist with. I can only think that I was looking for a different type of biography or family history. My university has a large collection of privately published family histories in the library, and their discreet and simple chronologies make them unexciting reading. White's approach is original, and challenging. Given the high reputation of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press for publishing experimental work of quality, I should have known what to expect. If I, and the friend to whom I lent the book for a second opinion, found it too demanding a read, the fault is ours, not the writer's.

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Terri-Ann White's *Finding Theodore and Brina* is also reviewed in this issue by Donna Lee Brien.

In October 1997 Terri-ann White published an early extract of this work in *TEXT*.

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A number of recent books have taken family histories, real and imagined, as their subject. In the last two months I have read *Beyond Duck River* by Angela Martin (Hodder Headline Australia, 2001) and *Remembering Malcolm Macquarrie* by Maggie Blick (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001) and now, Terri-ann White's *Finding Theodore and Brina*. Each of these writers stretches her story across a number of generations of an Australian family to write, in the process, a previously unexplored slice of Australian history. Perhaps it is a sign of the new millennium, or the end of the old, or all the talk of black-armbanding, or even the fanfare attending the opening of the long-awaited National Museum of Australia in Canberra, but the past seems firmly on the agenda in fiction as well as non-fiction prose. In White's work (as that of Martin and Blick) it is the narrator's own past, alongside that of her ancestors, who drive the story.

> So I decide that the first story I will start with is mine: how I was formed and where I belong. It takes a little fortitude to absorb the details from history, the exclusions and hardships of those who came before me that have not been part of my life. (211)

This is history writing from the family level up, with national events (like wars) as the background, but individual stories to the fore.

The narrator of this story begins with a pair of relatives who travelled from London to Australia in the 1850s. Both were Jewish - Theodore, her great-great-grandfather, was a convict while Brina, her great-great-grandmother, was an unmarried emigrant on supported passage - and through their lives and those of their descendants, the narrator uncovers and reveals the transgressions and secrets that have remained hidden within her family. These people kept silent about many taboos, but her discovery of madness, crime, illegitimate births, loss of faith and miscegenation forces the narrator not only to confront the truth about her family and herself, but, looking outward, to Australia itself.

These personal, even private, stories are vividly, movingly and imaginatively told. Some can be contained in a paragraph, others spread across a chapter or more. Not wanting to spoil the pleasure of discovery, I will quote just one of these, a brief one.

> There was another man named Theodore Krakouer who lived in Sydney in the 1970s and who had spent all of his money on the costs involved in preserving his parents' bodies in a funeral parlour... Eventually, the money dried up and the two long-deceased bodies had to go somewhere: into the ground or burned? The customer had been a firm believer in

> cryogenics, but this loving son could feed his habit, or faith, no longer. Those bodies had been stored in the funeral parlour for twenty years. So the story goes. (132)

As the narrator traces the branches of her family tree, she finds meaning in the recurring patterns of love, sex and shame, of pain and the fear of death, of madness, and especially in the cycle of pregnancies, births and deaths she discovers. These are all personal concerns but major historical events are also represented within these tales, and thus the narrative moves from why one woman gives up her baby to why another becomes a Fifth Columnist, her life animated by the passions of politics. Similarly, the narrator becomes emeshed in wider concerns:

> I am in a fug from reading the discussions since the start of the nation, the counter-histories, the eyewitness accounts. I absorb catchphrases and could parrot back to you any number of theories about race and the establishment of Australia; it keeps me awake at night. (122)

This is also a story of Perth - although Theodore arrives on the Mermaid in 1851, moments of the Swan River Colony's history are traced from its shaky beginnings as an unsuccessful settler colony in 1829 until it materialises as the narrator's modern late-twentieth century city.

The narrator tells us she is the 'keeper of secrets, the family archivist, hiding behind a signature and a barrage of words' (20) and hers is certainly, at least in part, the story of the almost unwilling family historian who is increasingly drawn into this strange pastime as she pieces together fragments of the past:

> My head holds these dead people. I have fallen unwittingly into a pastime about which I am sceptical. I see people in libraries and archives and Family History Centres, obsessed with finding traces of family in microform, in scraps of paper, officially, and sometimes arbitrarily, preserved for posterity. Going blind, forgetting about their own lives, learning to love a different intensity of light in this search for clues. (67)

Finding Theodore and Brina becomes also, because of this self-consciousness of the narrator, in part, a meta-discourse about the writer's process and progress, the difficulties and pleasures of research, the improbable coincidences, the secrets uncovered, the amazing stories found. The narrator discovers shame, amnesia and avoidance, but 'well aware of the dangers of desiring a dramatic family biography', is motivated by a desire to remember the forgotten: 'I don't want to forget Theodore and Brina but it appears everybody else in the world already has' (25). But the records are scant and the narrator has to make sense of these silences, 'what is found and what is not there' (23), as well as to deal with the fragmented nature of memory and how the past is sometimes misremembered.

I have carefully used 'the narrator' rather than 'the author' above, although often I was tempted to understand these as one and the same. *Finding Theodore and Brina* reads as a creative nonfiction rendering of family history/memoir which includes clearly signposted fictionalised and imagined sections alongside readily identifiable people (the footballing Krakouer brothers for instance) and quotes documents and references which can be (with slightly more effort) verified. But I am wary. Once, not that long ago, I mistook Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* (Fourth Estate, London, 1993) for a marvellous (fictionalised) biography of Daisy Flett. Just as the lack of footnotes or listed references did not signpost fiction for me in Shields' case, here the fact that White's book is listed by the publishers as fiction does not totally convince me that it is a wholly invented tale. The book works wonderfully as fiction, but all my instincts tell me *Finding Theodore and Brina* is White's innovative way of writing a version of her family history. This method certainly incorporates fictional imagined passages, the narrator revealing she is 'circling around fantasy and what I know, both from the present and the past' (159-60) and is '[o]pen to

persuasion, to changing my mind, to imaginings, to seeing the world in entirely different ways' (160) but the result reads as somehow 'true'.

This weaving through of the real with the imagined makes engrossing and thought-provoking reading, whatever genre we might label the product.

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Terri-ann White's *Finding Theodore and Brina* is also reviewed in this issue by Molly Travers

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The Lovemakers

review by Ali Alizadeh

The Lovemakers, book one: Saying all the great sexy things
Alan Wearne
Penguin Books 2001
Rrp $29, 359pp
ISBN 0 14 024541 3

> Form *The Lovemakers* ('Lovelife (i)')
>
> *Love? Well, it needn't be that and procreation ditto.*
> *Sex? It's not mere 'sex' and as for fucking well of course*
> *but not for everyone and hardly all the time.*
> *Intimacy? But so much else is, whilst 'intercourse' sounds*
> *mere textbook.*

Associated with the 'class of '68' and known for his fascination and involvement with Melbourne's suburban life and the city's transient cultures over the past four decades, Alan Wearne is an ambitious and prolific writer. Few established contemporary poets have shown the commitment or innovation displayed by Wearne in writing the long cycles of thematic poems known as 'narrative verse'. Now, with *The Lovemakers, book one: Saying all the great sexy things* he has produced, according to the book's publicity, the first volume of an 'epic' poem of late twentieth century Australia.

In reading Wearne's (or others') contemporary works, however, the conventional definitions of 'epic,' 'narrative' and 'verse' may be inapt and misleading. As William Carlos Williams noted in 1956; 'verse' is not a fixed and complete term in modern (and post-modern) poetics:

> Verse...has always been associated in men's minds with "measure," i.e., with mathematics. In scanning any piece of verse, you "count" the syllables... Today verse has lost all measure...nothing in our lives, at bottom, is ordered according to that measure; our social concepts, our schools, our very religious ideas, certainly our understanding of mathematics are greatly altered (Williams 2000: 84)

The Lovemakers echoes Williams' observations about the changing 'measures' of society, religion and education. Although not particularly 'free-verse' in his style - with generally consistent iambic rhythms and the inclusion of such 'closed' forms as sonnets, villanelles and limericks - Wearne employs and enhances the fundamental shifts of the cultural values within this book's content.

A playful cynicism towards public institutions is at the core of *The Lovemakers*. In the sequence titled 'Catholics for friends (i)', for example, Wearne treats religion with an insightful irony:

'We're Catholics, sortov Catholics,'
he admitted. 'Well it's what we put on the forms.'

Wearne is a laconic, sharp and pragmatic poet. In the same sequence, he observes the education system with an inspired sarcasm:

There were few snobs like the snobs
who had to send their kids to State school.

And no,
Mother hardly wanted Hannah like those entrants
in the Interhouse Junior Beauty Pageant:
Miss Wattle, Miss Banksia, Miss Waratah,
and the winner…Miss Flowering Gum!

Although the book is titled *The Lovemakers* (with a haunting sexual image by Christian Wild on its cover) the author's irony - intentionally, perhaps - outweighs the sensuality and romance between his characters.

While there is little shortage of quirky sexual innuendo and spirited commentary on the confused and disheveled love-lives of his text's various and innumerable protagonists, Wearne is hesitant and tongue-in-cheek with the intimate moments. Most of his depictions of sex are detailed and lively caricatures with 'thought-bubble' dialogues:

So, after work
that Saturday, they lay down on a bed;
Ray put on the thing. They went berserk!
Their minds just ceased. All reason seemed on strike.
'My God!' they howled, 'so this is what it's like!'

Wearne's most refined skill is writing knowledgeable, personal and vivid lyrics employing the urban Anglo-Australian vernacular to its fullest capacity. In the voice of his best-realised and most multi-dimensional character Barb, he displays an effective inclination for emotional expansion and a projection of energy beyond the cynicism, satire and negations of the 'class of '68.' Through this character, Wearne allows for inspired glimpses of dreamy imagism:

here's what Barb was dreaming: it's Melbourne and,
bar for her and Roger marching past the town hall,
Swanston Street is empty; on a review stand, parents:
hers, his; but there's not time to salute: the children
have to run: past the cathedral, the station, over the river
and down St Kilda Road: no cars, no trams, no one,
only them.

'The planet's most suburban girl', Barb is one half of a 'swinging' married couple in the book. She believes 'Innocence is ignorance dressed/for those who don't particularly care.' With her husband Roger as equally detached, her adulteries provide Wearne with the themes and content for the book's best narrative poetry.

During the course of *The Lovemakers*, Barb has affairs with two characters outside her marriage including Karl who, Peter Porter has observed, is 'intended as a caricature of Wearne himself' (Porter 2001:6). In 'Lovelife (iii)', one of the book's best and most fluid story-telling moments, Neil, Barb's work-mate, falls in love with her in the office:

The evening the form went out
their lift had stuck; they used the stairwell.
Following her, and seeing her turn to smile, he knew

how swift her heart was running,
how they had to kiss, how hard, long and shared
the kiss would be; and how it wouldn't be enough
this life in the stairwell.

Although *The Lovemakers*' countless characters may seem too many for constructing a single 'cover-to-cover' reading *a la* a novel or an epic - verse or not - as a collection of linked lyrics, this book is one of the year's most impressive, accomplished and telling publications.

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Ali Alizadeh is reading for his PhD at Deakin University. His paper, Towards a Poetics for the Epic*, is published in this issue of TEXT.*

TEXT
Vol 5 No 2 October 2001
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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Bloody Words

review by Steve Evans

Bestseller
M.T.C. Cronin
Sydney, Vagabond Press 2001
118 pages, rrp $22.00.
ISBN 0 9578378 2 8

Bestseller is a book about making meaning and some broad concerns of communicating. It is conceptually quite dexterous, within its self-imposed range of issues. Though flawed, it is a refreshingly individual collection.

The five sections of *Bestseller* are named for various aspects of words and writing. They are preceded by the allegorical title poem, which reminds me a little of Miroslav Holub (and Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska, for that matter), though its wry appeal does not reach the heights of his work.

Red is the signature colour for the collection. It infiltrates many poems, echoing the actual red of the leading and trailing pages, and blood is its frequent complement. Other motifs? The moon shines its ghostly light over a number of poems, and fists and spiders appear several times. Not surprisingly for a collection that deals with language and meaning, the poems are often populated with poets.

There was so much repetition of imagery that I couldn't help thinking about a poem-generating software program I once found, and the likelihood of producing something like 'the moon is a bloody red fist/watched by a poet/who dreams the language of spiders'.

More seriously, I had to wonder why Cronin resorts to such vagueness as, 'And mountains meaning something else/ Than mountains' (in the ambitious 'The Poet in an Epoch of Influence' sequence). It is as if she is striving for a kind of mythic quality that does not always come off. That kind of abstraction may appeal to readers who look for an emotional landscape rather than a physical one, but I prefer a more direct and literal connection with the subject.

Cronin addresses the significance, and individuality, of this struggle for understanding:

> For all the things I write
> Even those which seem
> To have no meaning
> Are true
> Somewhere inside me

> Is that enough?
> Can we, with kindness,
> Elevate ourselves to mystery?
>
> 'To What I Created' (2)

Cronin has a tendency to associate fragments in a disconnected list, relying on a reader's willingness to fill in gaps. Placing such trust in both the reader and the value of the poem is not always going to be rewarded. A riddling rattle of brief statements can be offputting.

Fortunately for those readers who find comfort in such things, most poems seldom stray far from a personal outlook, so there is the anchor of a narrating character. The reader can usually identify a narrator's voice, even in the middle of a storm of abstractions.

I do like the fact that Cronin takes risks and explores different paths. The rewards when this succeeds are substantial. She has a pleasing diversity of approach in style and subject, and an absence of cynicism. She plays philosopher but it is with a degree of attachment, so her musings retain a sense of personal investment and power.

I don't agree with all that Cronin writes, however. In 'These Days', she addresses the stillness of poetry. The poem moves fluidly through the way things fit into the spaces we have for them as a prelude to making a case for poetry as an agent of brilliant activity, but it then suddenly lapses into pessimism. Words 'sit in silence/ Like protestors/ Stay hidden in books/ Even when those books are read'. I would argue that this is manifestly not true; even the imagined monastic reclusiveness of words falters as an image. In life, words do not stay hidden. Poems live in our heads, are remembered and are spoken about, and they often haunt us into seeking them out again.

There is also an occasional awkwardness, such as 'My unacted upon desires' (in 'The Poet in an Epoch of Influence') and 'as long/ as it takes to change to an/ acquaintance from a stranger' (in 'Be Spider'). These suggest a need for tighter editing. There are some poems that still read like drafts, waiting the critical turn or idea that will lift them, but alongside such work are more developed and arresting pieces.

Though humour is sometimes strained by effort, and seems too earnest, I did admire its effect in 'The Enormous Night' where a stilted voice and an essential warmth combine to create a compellingly positive sense of identity amid grief.

A word about the book as object. *Bestseller* is an elegant thing. The cover design unifies the collection through its spare use of pictographic characters on the cover, and the coloured pages inside reinforce this. Such attention to detail is a constant reminder of the collection being a treatment on a singular theme.

Reading these poems and thinking of Cronin's engagement with the world recalls Seamus Heaney's statement:

> Technique...involves not only a poet's way with words (but) also a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art... It is the whole creative effort...to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form.
>
> (from 'Feeling into Words' in H. Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.)

The mechanics of Cronin's poetry may sometimes be too visible but there is no doubting her integrity, or her ability to conjure a poem that jolts the reader with an original concept.

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TEXT
Vol 5 No 2 October 2001
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
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