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TEXT Review

Lines, Breaths and Words - What Defines a Poem Visually?

Review by Komninos Zervos

The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English
Rosemary Huisman
Continuum, 1998
rrp $38.47pb, 184 pp
ISBN 0 304 70734

For anyone interested in the many ways in which poetry can be written and read, this book provides a cultural and literary mapping by investigating the semiotic conventions of the genre 'poetry'. For me it was exceptionally timely. You get to a point in your PhD research when everything you read, see and hear, seems relevant to the study. That's the time for consolidation, focussing, for suring up the thesis: time to get down to saying exactly what you want to say, and time to say no to any further input.

But, as is the nature of academic research, once you have the knowledge you cannot ignore it, as each piece in the inevitably unsolvable jigsaw puzzle seems important but unable to be placed, at this stage, into place. Such is the case with this book, Rosemary Huisman's *The Written Poem***.** Instead of introducing new aspects to my understanding of the various poetries, their production, practice, practitioners and audiences, this book actually helped me to consolidate my own observations of the many ways poetries can be written and read, or spoken and heard.

In my study I am grappling with what a poem is in its sounding, and what poetry looks like, and how it is being read in cyberspace. I thought the findings of a scholar of old English texts and on the topic of the written poem would be quite different to my own, but was pleasantly surprised when we seemed to arrive at similar conclusions but from seemingly opposite directions.

At the same time this book helped me to see the body of published poetry in a new way, from a different perspective, as cyberspace has made me look at poetry differently.

The book's period of study spans eight hundred years and is refreshingly concerned with the workings of poetry rather than the nationality of the literary genre. The book argues that poetry has to be recognised as poetry before it is read as poetry. So poetry is poetry by the standards developed to recognise it as poetry, by the way it looks to the human eye, it's visual form or seen form - it's graphology, as Huisman calls it.

Yet the visual poem is a complex signifier, and can be read in many ways. We read the way a poem looks long before we read a word as language. Huisman investigates the semiosis of the seen poem, the semiotic of poem as art object, the semiotic of the body and layers of meaning brought to a poem by the performance or presentation of it, and the semiotic of language and the readings of meaning in words and their spatial arrangement on a page.

It is a thorough examination of the many ways we write and read poetry.

Huisman argues that the written poem, that is, the poem written to be read silently, has only really

developed over the past one hundred years - the writing-down or publishing of poetry, prior to the twentieth century, being a representation in written language of a phonological poetry - poetry that used rhyme and rhythm, and sounds of spoken language.

In Old English manuscripts, she finds greater correlation in the semiotic conventions with twentieth-century poetry than with any periods of poetry in between. This was a revelation for me, as I had never quite made the distinction before. As a performance poet I was aware that some poetry suited performance and some did not, but this book has allowed me to understand why.

Despite recent millennial predictions about the crisis in poetry, publishing, and the lack of good Australian literary criticism (by certain more traditional sections of academia) books like Huisman's are living proof of a healthy debate and the presence of worthy Australian theorists. Along with other theorists such as McKenzie Wark, Hazel Smith, Roger Dean, Kevin Brophy, Martin Johnston, Ilana Snyder, Susan Hawthorne, Patricia Wise, etc, Huisman's bookhelps us in our understanding of poetry as a social process, as a cultural entity and as a media element. Solid theory is here exemplified by practical sampling from an Australian cultural record.

This book is a must for any scholar of poetry, any reader of poetry, any writer of poetry, and any teacher of writing.

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Writing with Imagination: A Practical Guide

review by Nicole Bourke

Writing with Imagination: A Practical Guide
Linda Aronson
Macmillan Education Aust., South Yarra,
rrp $24.04pb, 196pp
ISBN 0-7329-4682-4

A quick flick through Linda Aronson's book on imaginative writing will tell you a great deal about its intended audience and uses. This is a book developed to help secondary students (and teachers) faced with the task of developing skills in writing fiction, probably in the context of a high school English class. Each chapter is simple and clear, with abundant sub-headings and small bites of discussion, diagrams, tables and exercises. It is clearly a workbook, with brief discussions followed by illustrative exercises.

The book is divided into four main sections, each of which includes a series of chapters. The first section – 'Thinking like a writer' - is largely given over to a discussion of the two styles of thinking which Aronson insists are intrinsic to all professional writers (lateral and vertical thinking), as well as the Three Step process for putting the formulation into action. The second section – 'Getting Good Ideas' - consists of a series of exercises for coming up with plot ideas, while Part Three – 'Narrative Skills' - is about developing those ideas further, breaking down the elements of plot into the three-act structure familiar to most scriptwriting students. The final section –'The Personal Element' - focuses on how to utilise memories and senses to enhance your writing.

Writing with Imagination has a lot to offer the young writer who is struggling to come up with plot ideas. The ideas for analysing and reworking traditional tales are certainly interesting and productive, although I found myself thinking that they might ultimately lead to students unable or unwilling to explore more innovative plot devices.
Many of the exercises and suggestions for developing narratives are specifically designed for students facing the task of writing during an exam, and certainly many of the devices would be useful to the student wanting to be able to write a piece of short fiction in an hour or less, but I found myself wanting more from this text. I wondered how students, schooled in the methods developed in this text, would move from writing exam fiction to more considered work.

While there is some discussion of metaphor and dialogue in the final chapters the majority of the book is focused on structure and plot. In this sense the title is misleading, since most of the exercises and suggestions for developing plot and narrative ideas have relatively little to do with the kind of imaginative writing which the title and cover (with its moon and feathers) imply. Far less attention is paid to what I tend to think of as the actual work of writing - to the development of voice or character for example - to the writing of one good sentence, and then another. Perhaps this has more to do with my own process as a writer - to my belief that plot and structure are certainly important but equally important is the need for strong characterisation and good style.

I think the thing that most worried me about this text was its prescriptiveness. Many 'how to write' texts argue for a particular way of approaching the writing of 'good' fiction. The kind of formulaic approach used in *Writing for Imagination* is no different. By the time I finished reading I had rather startling visions of high school students struggling to write stories to formula, producing cookie-cutter fictions that their teachers found easy to mark - checking off the key elements described in the text - but which they (both students and teachers) found largely dull as a result.

I was worried by how the book would be positioned by a teacher - would students be expected to accept the theorems on how 'good' fiction is written as absolute? Would students find inspiration here, or the kind of bored listlessness I remember from English classes? I was reminded of how well my high school English teacher had managed to make even *A Clockwork Orange* seem boring. It has been a long time, however, since I was in high school, and perhaps I have forgotten how exciting it all seemed at the time. How on first cracking the spine of my now falling-apart copies of *Lord of the Flies* or *Hamlet*, I discovered something that no textbook would ever be able to match - a love of literature that has never left me.

After struggling with how useful this book is for high school students, or their teachers, I handed it over to my daughter and her friends - teenagers who are the book's intended audience. It's school holidays and much shuffling of feet and rolling of eyes ensued, until they finally agreed (under duress and with extravagant promises about new Korn CDs) to have a look and tell me what they thought. Their verdict? It's a textbook. No better or worse than any of the other textbooks which lurk, lunch-encrusted and largely unloved, in the bottom of their schoolbags. Books they are sure their teachers love far more than they do, and ones that they will leave behind them when they finally venture out into the world.

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