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W/EDGE**reviewed by Kristin Henry***W/EDGE*

University of Western Sydney, Nepean

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When does writing stop being demanding and start being impenetrable?

A few years ago when Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* came out I read a damning review of it in a regional newspaper. Where were all the real poets, the reviewer lamented. Where were the Tennysons and the Wordsworths? Why did this Porter woman have to be so dirty? The reviewer obviously didn't read much contemporary poetry.

I was so annoyed by the review that I wrote a letter to the editor. My complaint wasn't that the reviewer had been scathing, but that he never should have agreed to review the book in the first place because his limited reading made him incapable of discussing it in any credible way.

Remembering this, and with howls of 'anti-intellectualism' ringing in my imagination, I wondered if I was the right person to review the first three issues of *W/Edge*, the new journal of writing from the University of Western Sydney. Many of the contributors are professional writers and performers, academics and Masters students in the writing program. There should be - and there is - some good new writing here. But much of it seemed to me self-consciously obscure in a very old fashioned way. These three mags left me wondering whose fault it was if I often didn't get the point.

Here is an extract from a paper by Sabrina Achilles, the co-ordinator of the editorial committee, which appears in Issue 1 under the title 'Ficto-criticism, Casting the Self'. She has just described looking out the window of a train in which she was a passenger and seeing a man wave:

The wave had triggered in me a non-dialectical operation of the regime of signs. To feel, here, does not pertain to a belief system but to an altered state, and the 'I took' is not closed into an affirmation of myself by appropriation but is rather a tool of transformation, casting me into the unknown. The subject of the observation, the omen, is clearly not reducible, it is unable to be categorised within a binary either/or regime but is both. It belongs to the past, present and future at once, it is both of the subject and not of the subject, general and specific. It is both reconstitutive, belonging to reconciliation - a good omen is something deserving thereby replacing the subject as central, constituting it within a Christian, teleological regime of redemption. And the omen is de-constitutive, it marks a transgressive break of the self with the self (with its narrative story) as it acts upon the body/self with discursive and spatial regimes other than those of subjectivity and interiority (with the distancing, split, objectifying, knowing gaze implied therein), and casts the body/self into the unfamiliar assemblage.

Okay, so theoretical jargon is an easy target. But the editors are asking for more of it. Issue 2 is the most problematic. In their eagerness to create something visually interesting the designers have sometimes sacrificed clarity and meaning. There are numerous folded pages, and random pages of text on opaque waxy paper through which the text on the following page is visible. It's infuriatingly like trying to read a newspaper while holding it up to the sun.

Gillian Barlow's 'In Crete' is a romantic little traveller's tale playfully told. George Alexander shows some spacey humour in his sci-fi piece 'Way to Go'. But on the whole there's not much to smile about. Perhaps this is at the heart of *W/Edge*'s difficulties: the lack of balance - between accessible and experimental pieces, between complexity of content and complexity of form, between light and dark. And as 'The Riting of the Runda', the written version of a performance work by Hazel Smith demonstrates, no amount of typeface variety, eccentric page layout or eschewing of upper case letters can disguise clichés or compensate for the page not being the stage.

This issue actually features several pieces which, intentionally or not, take the mickey out of unintelligible writing by playing with language's propensity for not communicating. One story is filled with medical terminology, one begins with definitions of made up words, another offers fanciful alternative definitions for familiar words. In defining 'away' Jill Farrar says:

What I cannot say, cannot articulate, am incapable of enunciating must remain, tantalising, worrying and bedevilling.

That pretty well sums up Issue 2 for me.

In Issue 3, there is still some confusion about where one piece ends and the next begins, though in general the layout is less tricky and the writing more readable. The fact that the last issue is the best is encouraging.

In 'Paris, ça n'existe pas', Robyn Ferrell describes her experience as an Australian writer trying to work in Paris, and argues that since Hemingway and Gertrude Stein '...there is no such thing as the writer in Paris'.

Josephine Wilson looks worth keeping an eye on. In 'The Dirty Little Realist' she conducts a disgustingly funny interview/tour around a murder scene, and Beaten is her sardonic fin de siècle performance piece echoing Ginsberg:

I saw the best bodies of my generation destroyed by madness, / starving hysterically naked,
...who knew themselves lucky not to sit like some on boxes under bridges in Biafra, or cough
on Sixth Floors in Harlem, and never know a night to be 'tubercular', as such...

Kristen De Kline's oblique and violent story about gay bashing, 'The Last Resort Bar', lingers after the reading, and finally, Diane Fahey's poems are irresistible for their vitality and wit in the midst of stultiloquence. (Look it up.)

Kristin Henry is a Melbourne based poet who teaches at Victoria University of Technology (TAFE)

LETTERS AND DEBATE

letter from Pam Brown

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au
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A Woman's Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets

reviewed by Tess Brady

A Woman's Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets.

Jenny Digby

University of Queensland Press

RRP \$24.95pb. 256pp

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Jenny Digby is a Melbourne based researcher and postgraduate student who has specialised in Australian women's poetry, and while her critical essays have been represented in other collections, *A Woman's Voice* is her first book. It is a collection of interviews with twelve contemporary Australian women poets.

A dozen women poets, or the full quid perhaps, (for those of us who remember how many shillings were in a pound,) gives Digby enough scope to cover a spectrum of poetic approaches and importantly, to be able to set up debates of contrast and convergence. In her Introduction she sets out to explore "...theoretical issues concerning women's poetry: questions such as the relationship of the woman poet to poetic tradition, writing and gender, female subjectivity, sexuality and languages. "These are no small goals and I for one think she's pulled off most of them.

Her interviewing is not coy, and yet at the same time she has created a situation where the poets' responses to her questions are both thoughtful and trusting.

There is much in the collection. It is, for example possible to trace out concerns of the poets, searching for contrast and convergence. When talking about their poetic voice Diane Fahey talks of healing and integration, she comments " When I started to write I found that poetry played a very important part in my own healing process. In a sense I see that each poem can be a small act of integration..." On one level this contrasts with the erotic and playful voice of Dorothy Porter, but on another level perhaps it doesn't, and I am struck by the similarity of concerns by those poets who I would otherwise place poles apart. Porter comments "It has been great fun writing in a lesbian voice and directly and explicitly exploring stuff that I have written about in a more veiled way." Ania Walwicz explores further the need to write, to express, when she comments "...And it also could be seen as a very primitive writing too; it could be seen as writing which erupts in someone as a form of pressure of speech. And erupts in quite a natural way, too."

There is fun and playfulness here as well. Fay Zwicky on aspects of French theory:" It's all right if you're French. You sound better in French. Much more balanced and weighty. If you say it in English it sounds a bit cranky, like a nutty little person in a tea-cosy." And Pamela Brown comments on a familiar problem for the women poets, the lack of critical reception to her work; "There use to be, up until about seven years ago. When *Keep It Quiet* came out, it all literally went quiet!"

The final word goes to Judith Rodriguez who says on sexism in language "Language can learn new manners and we can get rid of that skewed distinction." Perhaps our Prime Minister needs a few women poets as language advisers and speech writers.

Other poets interviewed are the late Gwen Harwood, who was the first Australian woman writer I ever met, saw or heard and who, as a consequence, became a role model for me, Antigone Kefala, Jan Owen, Dorothy Hewett, Jennifer Strauss, and Judith Beveridge. Each of these interviews are quotable and insightful.

I have used this collection with my students as both example and role models and also as an excellent precursor to the debate *Is there such a thing as a female aesthetic, a women's poetic voice?*

Such collections of interviews are more useful to the student of writing than so many "How To.." books and yet there is so little available dealing with Australian writers. Perhaps we could now have the companion volume where Australian male poets are encouraged to be as open and as frank as their sisters, or is this an oxymoron, a publishing impossibility? I wonder.

My only gripe with the collection is the price, at \$24.95 it is an expensive paperback to set on any course as a text.

Tess Brady lectures in Creative Writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus and is co-editor of TEXT

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au
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