

Reviews contents

- Nigel Krauth, *The Creative Writer's Mind*
review by Sue Woolfe page 2
- Linda Weste, *The Verse Novel: Australia & New Zealand*
review by Sarah Pearce page 10
- Florian Mussnug, Mathelinda Nabugodi and Thea Petrou (Eds.), *Thinking Through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing*
review by Amelia Walker page 16
- Ann-Marie Priest, *My Tongue Is My Own: A Life of Gwen Harwood*
review by Philippa Moore page 21
- Eugen Bacon, *Chasing Whispers* and *An Earnest Blackness*
review by Dominique Hecq page 30
- Dominique Hecq, *Smacked and other stories of addiction*
review by Julia Prendergast page 34
- Michael J. Leach, *Chronicity*
review by Ian Gibbins page 38
- Mark O'Flynn, *Undercoat*
review by Michele Seminara page 44
- Emilie Collyer, *Do You Have Anything Less Domestic?*
review by Bronwyn Lovell page 49



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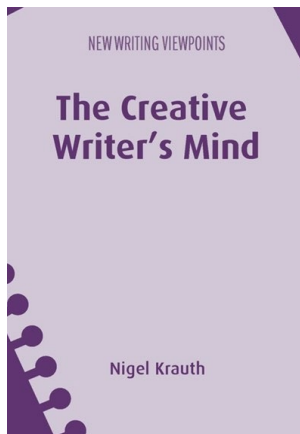
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TEXT review

The writer's mind-work

review by Sue Woolfe



Nigel Krauth

The Creative Writer's Mind

Multilingual Matters, Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto, 2022

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Nigel Krauth's book is so rich in what creative writers are seldom granted but yearn for, from inspiring quotations to insightful explanations to occasional – perhaps too occasional – revelations of his own practise, that anyone embarking on a life of what Krauth calls “the writer's mind-work” would be foolhardy not to pack it. Experienced writers too, for Krauth's thinking is that rare joy, it clarifies and distils what we are doing. I would've packed it when I first embarked on creative writing, about the same time as Krauth himself. I will still keep it near. Krauth and I met over the years on stages at festivals, and whispered snatches of

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encouragement and advice, mainly about my terror of accounting for myself to audiences, or critics' reactions to our work.

I must add a note declaring special interest here – in his Introduction and his “Coda”, Krauth speaks kindly of my book *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: A Writer Looks at Creativity and Neuroscience* (2007), but I'm not mentioned elsewhere, and so what I say is as impartial as a fellow novelist can be, a fellow teacher of creative writing, and fellow researcher into what's known to science about creativity.

Krauth starts at a very different point to many writing teachers who insist that what we need is craft – we do of course, but as my daughter used to say as an impatient five year old – “I already know that!” He encourages us to think about the nature of thinking:

The writer has to come to terms with and exploit – but not be exploited by – what happens in her/his mind in comprehensive and multidimensional ways. The nature of thinking has always been foundational to the nature of writing. Good writing in all forms is an outcome of authorial thinking pressured by the conventionality of cultural views but also triggered by input from individual drives and perceptions. (p. 97)

As I pored over the thinking of writers that Krauth has assembled, I felt a surge of relief. We writers are in dire need of his clarity to reveal what he calls our “mind-work” – even that term I've already plagiarised! In this age which stresses the validity of “lived experience”, we need a writer's “lived experience”, but never their legislation. Enough people insist on legislating for us – critics, agents, publishers, not to say readers. We're like tightrope walkers figuring out for ourselves how to apply what others have taught us but forever inadequately, for no situation can go exactly as planned; how to still all our errant wobbling muscles on that thin swaying stretch of wire: how to stay up in the air. That's the how-to-think we need. We can't depend on what worked before but figure it out book by book: what worked for the last book isn't going to work for this one. With every book, if you're like me, we're on our knees.

Krauth's book comfortingly assumes that all we creative writers share a common mind-work but with novel pathways:

The way in which two individuals think towards the same outcome seldom means that the two have thought in exactly the same way. How we each think reflects the typical practices of our mind, the way habitual thinking pathways have been constructed by the bodies we have, the influence of our environments and cultures, and our personal experience. (p. 79)

In other words, in very general terms, and in my terms, although we come up with very different things, all minds create in something the same way as others because we have the same mind architecture, with of course wide-ranging variations stored in it, and ready, in an

entirely idiosyncratic way, to unite bits of what's stored, with other, often seemingly unlikely bits until, with patience and trust, a new thought arrives that violates all our expectations. Krauth's assumption of our common mind-work is radical. So much for the platitude that "we all create in different ways".

So, to our mind-work – or the term that early in Krauth's scholarly career he delighted in: "the literary imagination". Krauth points out that critics and scientists are listened to more seriously than writers. Perhaps, he hints, that's partly our fault: few of us have spent time and patience developing an understanding of our "mind-work" beyond describing it in craft terms – in developing what he calls "metathinking" – so when at a festival we might be asked, for example, where we get our ideas from, we might blurt out "the shower". As to my shame, I once did, illuminating no one. But I must hasten to add, that was long ago.

It may surprise many readers that scientists are starting to listen, as they never did in the decades-long rule of cognitive science, when a charismatic psychologist gave in 1950 a seminal speech that ruled out for half a century the study of diaphanous fancies like "inspiration", even "imagination". Now in a more enlightened era, neuroscientist Isabelle Wentworth wrote recently in a review of a chapter of mine: "...cognitive science does a lot of speaking about authors' brains, and much less listening. Here we get the opportunity to hear from an author directly as they reflect on their own cognitive processes" (Wentworth, 2021).

Yet so many contemporary writers of my acquaintance refuse to be aware of their mind-work, fearing like the poets of earlier times that the muse may sulkily abandon them – as if the fMRI discoveries by Professor Nancy Andreasen of 1995 and since had never happened, as if she and her team had not actually seen with their own amazed eyes the lively pattern of thought blazing all over the brain where there was an unknown network; till then, scientists had thought the only brain was a rational one. Andreasen discovered the network that the imagination uses, let's say she discovered the network of the imagination (dismissively known as the Default Mode Network or DMN) and she realized not only that the imagination was an ordinary part of all human brain machinery (so much for "I haven't got an imaginative bone in my body") but moreover that our thoughts long to go there – no, that's too romantic – they automatically skittle back to the imagination as soon as they're not required by what was first called the "task-focussed" network (now the Dorsal Attention Network or the DAN). So, all we humans live most of the time in our DMN, we dwell, we abide in our imagination! Recent pictures show that the DMN is like a vast city with dazzling, dancing lights, and the DAN, the network for our logical value-filled thoughts, is just a country town with only the all-night petrol pump lit up.

Also, for those aforesaid fearful writers, it's as if a legion of neuroscientists, ever since Andreasen's dramatic discovery, haven't been endlessly discussing the DMN's dialogue with the DAN – under what circumstances it happens, how it happens, and importantly for artists

(and here's the most important part to know) the realization that our thoughts can only be in either the DAN or the DMN at any one time. Only one or the other. So, for instance, we can't pretend to the brain not to have a plan, if we secretly nurse one. Or more controversially, pretend to ourselves we can journey out to the furthest universe in our imagination if we secretly keep to our plan! The renowned neuroscientist Arne Dietrich warned that we can create with that plan, but the thoughts we come up with will be stereotypical, in his word, "commonsense" (Dietrich, 2015, p. 10). Back to Nancy Andreasen – she found the DMN so fascinating that she is part-way through an ambitious life plan to study what's going on in the DMNs of sixty American creators, including many major writers, and thirty control subjects.

Many writers might argue: "But why should I know this? I'm an intuitive writer". The better to use our minds, Krauth argues. And he warns that's even more important in our troubled, tumultuous times, when we can no longer reflect the givens of the past – even the structures. He quotes Allen Ginsberg's lovely "Mind is shapely: Art is shapely" and "Inside skull is as vast as outside skull" (p. 9) and goes on:

Ginsberg drew our attention to the function, shape and contents of the mind in the writing process, particularly because we are so good at ignoring them, at taking them for granted, at observing outwards rather than inwards. This is good advice for any writer: Look at what happens in your head when your writing happens. (p. 9)

Krauth's vast reading of an array of writers means he is able to present the useful "mind-work" in action of those who've gone before us. For example, Virginia Woolf described the flow of phases in her compositional process – the first initial writerly thinking – undertaken in an English university city while "sitting on the banks of a river in thought" as a kind of fishing in the flow of consciousness:

'The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms ... life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.' (p. 52)

Or again, describing her initial thoughts and then reflecting on them:

'Thought ... had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked... But however small it was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind – put back into the mind it became at once very exciting, and important.' (p. 135)

Woolf shows here not only her ability for metacognition but also her understanding of how a writer can intervene in their thinking in order to organise it. So, when she put it back

‘...it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot.’ (p. 135)

Krauth takes this further, emphasising the importance of the “fringe thought”, the haloes around thoughts in our mind-work. So, he quotes Joan Didion as saying that thinking should be allowed by the creative writer to remain visual, stay unexplained, for:

‘You can’t think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don’t talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate ... the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.’ (pp. 87-88)

He quotes Italo Calvino as bearing this out:

‘For me, then, the first step in the conception of a story occurs when an image that comes to mind seems, for whatever reason, charged with meaning, even if I can’t explain that meaning in logical or analytical terms.’ (p. 89)

Calvino says those early images “give rise to the potentialities within them” (p. 89).

D.H. Lawrence is another writer who stressed the importance of fringe thought – not his words. His novels are problematic, but his descriptions of nature remain extraordinarily sensual. Krauth argues that they were “not achieved by laboured deduction and editing but by raids on the mind’s processing of sensory material in real-time.” He quotes Lawrence:

‘I have always tried to get an emotion out in its own course without altering it. It needs the finest instinct imaginable, much finer than the skill of craftsmen.’ (p. 94)

Krauth wisely cautions that the writer must involve all the senses, in order to draw the reader in. But I would contend that at least in an early stage of a creation, it’s damaging to think for a moment about the reader’s reactions, for then we risk our imaginative thinking sensing a task and skittering off into the “task-focussed” network of the brain. I’d argue that with a description we need to have a dialogue with ourselves and *draw ourselves in*, so we believe in it, trust in it.

A backbone of Krauth’s book is William James, Henry James’ older brother, not a creative writer but a major thinker of his times and a prolific non-fiction writer with insight, long before others, into our creating minds, who described the imagination as:

TEXT Vol 26 No 2 October 2022

General editor: Nigel Krauth. Reviews editor: Dominic Symes. Assistant reviews editors: Simon-Peter Telford and Amelia Walker

‘a seething cauldron of ideas, where everything is fizzling and bobbing about in a state of bewildering activity, where partnerships can be joined or loosened in an instant ... and the unexpected seems the only law... Like a bird’s life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings.’ (104)

Krauth explains that William James, way ahead of his time, coined the term *stream of consciousness* and described what became known as the two ways of thinking: associative thought and analytic thought – staples of neuroscience thinking on creativity today.

Though using the stream of consciousness has become a mantra of many writing courses, far less known is James’ reflection that the way we put thoughts together is not linear but more like a “train of consciousness” with carriages or segments connected by “fringes or haloes of relations” which may be like each other, or challengingly unlike. But contemporary neuroscientist Liane Gabora, writing about the architecture of our memory, points out that they may be only superficially unlike, for what is in the “carriages” or segments has been stored in our remarkable architecture not by meaning units (such as a memory of last summer’s visit to the beach when we glimpsed an old lover) but in the case say, of memories of sound, with sounds of similar frequencies, so like frequencies are stored with like, and almost-like frequencies are stored nearby with almost-like, and slightly-less-like but still reasonably-like frequencies are stored near that. So, the sound of a crashing breaker we heard while surfing may be stored in our memory not as in the experience of that day, but stored with and near something apparently unlikely as say the sound in our head of our crunching of a bitter winter apple – and both frequencies are emotionally tagged. And the point of all this is that when they, the apple crunching and the wave crashing, pre-linked, burst into our consciousness, they may be seen to have nothing to do with each other, but they have because they’re bound together with our emotions. With repeated iterations, the emotional link is discoverable, sometimes emerging as an image, and, here’s the magic of our memory architecture, story inspiring (I’m summarizing Gabora & Ranjan, 2013). The gap between those apparently disconnected thoughts, Krauth, in another context, quotes James describing as a gap “aching” to be filled, and to fill the gap “is our thoughts’ destiny” (p. 116).

Or as neuroscientist Nancy Andreasen reported after her startled observing of the creating mind:

It is as if the multiple association cortices [in the DMN, my explanation] are communicating back and forth ... simply in response to one another. The associations are occurring freely. They are running unchecked... Initially these associations may seem meaningless or unconnected. I would hypothesize that during the creative process the brain begins by *disorganizing*, making links between shadowy forms of objects or symbols or words or remembered experiences that have not previously been linked ...

many of which may seem strange or implausible. Out of this disorganization, self-organization eventually emerges. (Andreasen, 2011, p. 77)

Krauth argues that this writerly variation (of the above-described train carriages) on what neuroscientists call convergent thinking is paramount, because it “helps produce a work that a reader finds meaning in” (p. 48) – and, I would argue, a work in which a writer gradually discovers the meaning of all her apparently incoherent, seemingly-foolish endeavours.

Krauth argues that writing always involves the putting together of bits. Experimental writers, not wanting to use the linearity of traditional structures (which Krauth describes as seeming in our times “cleverly prepared by others, old-fashioned, a form of oppression”) might use non-sequiturs and other devices to try to reflect how one authentically thinks, but others eschew this, wishing to entertain or at least communicate with readers, at least “not thrust them further into despair”. Or at least “balance the real nature of thinking against thinking that the reader can engage with without excessive discomfort” (p. 105).

So, asks Krauth, what structures do we use, how can we put together the “bits”? He quotes several experimental writers, then gives his answer: till then, he’d been carefully keeping his own mind-work out of the text:

It excites me, as writer, to bump fragments up against each other, to work with the electrical charge generated by juxtaposed discrete ideas and experiences... I recall writing in the 1990s a story where I set out to compose its pieces in the unplanned order they came to me in, with a promise to myself that I must rearrange them later on, at the time of editing, to make sure the final version made sense. In the end I found, very surprised, that I could not better the order in which they first arrived in my head. The fragmented story was published in exactly the sequence I wrote it down... This method – perhaps to be called “placing it anyhow”, or “smashing it out”, or “picking up the next tile and placing it seemingly regardless” – I discovered, was a dependable way of writing creatively, because the directions for reading the fragments were already coded by the way my mind’s divergent thinking came up with the sequence. And I realised that “minding” the gap between fragments does not mean paying focused and rational attention to them: it means allowing my mind to do the organising. (p. 119)

The concept of “flow”, as defined by neuroscientist Csikszentmihalyi, is often mentioned in creative writing circles. It has always caused me disquiet, so I was pleased to read after Krauth listed Csikszentmihalyi’s nine indicators of flow, he quoted the seldom repeated words of Csikszentmihalyi:

A creative writer’s *modus operandi* cannot be flow, flow, flow all the time, but consists of ‘a constant alternation between a highly concentrated critical assessment and a relaxed, receptive, non-judgmental openness to experience.’ (p. 129)

My main departure from Krauth's thinking is the poor value he gives contemporary neuroscience in helping us understand our mind work. He says of my book, *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: A Writer Looks at Creativity and Neuroscience* – researched in 2005 and published in 2007 – that “After her years of research ... Woolfe admitted in the book that she became ‘disappointed in the infant technology of neuroscience’” (p. 3).

However, now in 2022, as you can see from the paragraphs above, I'm no longer disappointed. Fascinatingly, Nigel Krauth has explored similar territory with this depiction of his own mind-work and the mind-work of others. As neuroscientist Samir Zeki wrote about artists:

I hold the somewhat unusual view that artists are neurobiologists, studying the brain with techniques that are unique to them and reaching interesting ... conclusions about the organization of the brain. (Zeki, 1999, p. 76)

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TEXT review

Antipodean Advances: Australian and New Zealand Authors on the Verse Novel

review by Sarah Pearce



Linda Weste

The Verse Novel: Australia & New Zealand

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That while the verse novel is a beast which takes very different shapes, the foundation for each is storytelling. That there are rules, but that these are there to be broken. That the form is most certainly alive, breathing and is making a significant contribution to literature in general and poetry in particular.
(Jacobson in Weste, 2021, p. 137)

This review of Linda Weste's *The Verse Novel: Australia & New Zealand* forms a sequel to my review of her first selection of interviews with verse novel writers, *Inside the Verse Novel: Writers on Writing* (2020). Much like the earlier book, this iteration comprises an edited collection of interviews with 35 writers who have authored verse novels. Some have only written one verse novel, some are prolific poets as well as verse novelists and some are celebrated masters of the genre. Weste has conducted essentially the same interviews, with the same set of questions, providing strong continuity with the earlier volume. The questions address such aspects as the genesis of particular works, the writing process(es), any difficulties encountered along the way, and the privileging of narrative over poetic techniques and vice versa and why this was required or desired. The questions had sufficient breadth to elicit a reasonably comprehensive picture of writers' perspectives on the form generally and on their own approach to writing.

A deep sense of intertextuality emerges from the collection of interviews – many of the authors cite each other as influences, which contributes to a pleasing sense of camaraderie across the breadth of interviewees. Steven Herrick's mastery of the genre is cemented by his being mentioned by nearly every single author as an influence or inspiration. Dorothy Porter's name also arises delightfully often; her influence evidently endures through the work of these contemporary authors, particularly via *The Monkey's Mask* (2000), described by Tim Sinclair as a book 'in which not only did every poem sing in the way that poetry should – but in which there was character development, connection, narrative' (p. 42).

Questions regarding the verse novel form as a whole provoked some intriguing and ambivalent responses. John Newton describes the 'artificiality' of the form; 'the moment you resort to verse, any story you're telling is explicitly denaturalised. To put it over-simply, life doesn't rhyme' (p. 128). He later redefines this 'artificiality' as a kind of perversion or eccentricity:

A briefer, pithier way to put the case forward would be to argue that the verse novel form is perverse. It knows that it's foolish, eccentric, contrived – but this is a knowledge that it disavows ... having admitted its own absurdity, it still wants to play on the reader's feelings and on their credulity. (p. 129)

Melissa Bruce highlights this same paradox: 'there seems something irreverent and untamed about a verse narrative whilst ironically, simultaneously being so carefully and economically considered' (p. 214).

These comments echo some of the discussions regarding what is permitted or "afforded" by writing in verse. Lorraine Marwood describes those verse novels that have influenced her as having 'a concentrated kernel of emotion – without it covering you in a sickly cloying miasma' (pp. 14–15). Similarly, Sharon Kernot highlights poetry's ability, as 'an emotional

language’, to avoid being ‘overly sentimental’ when exploring big themes such as death and dying (p. 20). Steven Herrick puts it slightly differently, noting how poetry and verse novels ‘can step lightly over terrain where a prose novel may get bogged down’ (p. 7). These writers describe an interesting contradiction – the artificiality of verse, at least in some senses, actually permits a more direct or “real” expression of emotional worlds in the verse novel compared to the traditional novel. Paul Hetherington puts this somewhat differently, suggesting that the poetic and the real are inseparable, such that in the act of writing a verse novel, the aim is ‘to take the poetic into the quotidian world in order to see the quotidian transformed – and to try to show how the poetic inheres in everybody’s lives whether they notice it or not’ (p. 199).

Although many of the interviewees were unqualified fans of verse novels – and some were quite widely read in the genre – others had a less enthusiastic relationship with the form. John Newton explains a certain suspicion of the form that has never left him: ‘I never pick up a new example with unqualified relish’ (p. 130). Similarly, Melissa Bruce admits to her own reluctance regarding writing another one: ‘while I love to read the form, I hope and pray that my next book does not come out this way’ (p. 224). This comment is reiterated by some of the other writers regarding the difficulties of both writing and marketing verse novels. Jennifer Compton’s ambivalence regarding the verse novel took the form of a call for ‘re-branding’: ‘I kind of object to verse novel as nomenclature. I write poetry, not verse. Verse seems to me to be a notch below poetry’ (p. 245).

Many of the writers, particularly those who write for YA audiences, spoke of the accessibility of verse novels for younger audiences – a way into both poetry and novels. Luke Best aims to pull prose readers over to the ‘dark side’ using his theatrical and energetic verse (p. 103). Tim Sinclair describes the verse novel as a gateway drug: ‘once you’ve got people over their ruthless resistance to poetry through the poetry-in-disguise ruse of the verse novel, they might just give in and pick up a slim volume’ (p. 47). Judy Johnson, however, suspects that the reverse is true, where ‘verse novels have the potential to attract a wider novel-reading audience, but there must be a willingness on the part of the poet to meet the novel lovers halfway’ (p. 150).

As a final note on the form, several authors emphasised the crucial nature of the ‘verse’ component. Sherryl Clark describes a kind of impatience with ‘prosey’ verse novels that manifests in the desire to start chopping away words herself (p. 97). Geoff Page suggests that verse novels lacking in ‘metaphoric density’ may as well have been written in prose instead (p. 122). Tim Sinclair exhorts fellow writers thus: ‘if you want to write a collection of poetry, don’t pretend it’s a novel. If you want to cut a novel into line breaks, don’t pretend that’s poetry. Your reader is smarter than that’ (p. 48). Jordie Albiston reiterates this point quite brutally and beautifully, saying, ‘The act of breaking factual prose into lines will never, in itself, equal the creation of art’ (p. 174).

It is well known that the verse novel is not always terribly attractive to publishers. As a perfect exemplar of this problem, Melissa Bruce faced a potentially devastating hurdle – ‘the harsh commercial reality of art’ – when the publisher who agreed to publish *Picnic at Mount Disappointment* (2017) said that for the work to be cost-effective (determined by the number of pages printed), she would have to cut 30,000 words from a 68,000-word novel. However, with ‘ridiculous positivity’ and, to my mind, impressive cunning, she achieved the following structural feat, where:

Word by word,
beat by beat,
adhering to rhythm
reading aloud I
e l o n g a t e d
and re-spaced
line after line
without losing a word
or integrity
‘til the story met the
‘cost-effective’
page count conclusion. (pp. 219–220)

became:

Word by word, beat by beat,
adhering to rhythm, reading aloud I
elongated and re-spaced line after line
without losing a word
or integrity
‘til the story met the ‘cost-effective’
page count conclusion. (pp. 219–220)

As a poet myself, I find the intricate discussions of writing process to be some of the most engaging in the book. Several writers delved into the gritty technical details of linguistic conventions such as punctuation. On the advice of his MA supervisor, Tim Sinclair moved away from ambiguous punctuation towards ‘clarity. Full stops. Sentences that communicated to the reader when they ended’ (p. 45). This ‘revelation’ allowed him to develop the more novelistic aspects of *Nine Hours North* (2006). Similarly, Sharon Kernot explains that she tends to use minimal punctuation in her poetry; however, the editor of *The Art of Taxidermy* (2018) decided it would be better to rewrite the poems with all the commas, semicolons and colons that had been deliberately left out reinserted (p. 19). This has had an ongoing effect on

her poetry – now, when she writes, she thinks more carefully about how punctuation affects the poems. Sherryl Clark also highlights that punctuation was an issue for the editing process of *Farm Kid* (2004), particularly in terms of how to punctuate dialogue. Sadly, though she mentions producing a set of rules for punctuation, she does not fully explain how she solved the issue. Jordie Albiston moved in a contrasting direction. In *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (1998), she utilised lacunae in place of periods and commas. In her view, ‘these concrete spaces function like pauses in a musical score, the silences actually written into the structure’ (p. 172).

These kinds of decisions highlight how verse novels differ from both poetry and prose novels – some decisions must be made based on the constraints of poetry, and some based on the constraints of the novel. Melissa Bruce’s journey metaphor expresses her version of this beautifully: ‘the verse-style form was the vehicle, the carriage for the narrative journey. The carriage needed to provide the most comfortable, pleasing and interesting ride but not to distract from the view’ (p. 222). This description might indicate a privileging of the narrative elements over the poetic. Jeri Kroll’s discussion of *Vanishing Point* (2015) and verse novels more generally makes a case for balancing the two. She posits the verse novel as liminal and ‘interstitial’, having a dual nature that is celebrated rather than concealed – in it, prose and poetry coexist in a productive space of genre slippage (p. 112).

Luke Best outlined an impressive acrostic technique he used in *Cadaver Dog* (2020), wherein each stanza in the novel had nine lines, and the third, sixth and ninth lines of each stanzas comprised only one word – when read together, these words formed a kind of meta-poem-within-a-verse-novel that described ‘the gist of the story’ (p. 101). Perhaps most astonishingly, many readers have not picked up on this device; one reviewer even noted these shorter lines, describing them as creating a ‘hiccupping’ rhythm but seemingly failing to notice the message contained therein.

My major criticism of the collection is that it is very long at almost twice the length of the first collection. I found myself becoming fatigued as I worked my way through the book, and the interviews began to blur together rather than each holding its own as a unique contribution to discussion around the form. Although I understand the motivation for reprinting the eight interviews with writers from Australia and New Zealand included in the previous collection, this undoubtedly contributed to the length. However, given the niche into which this book fits, it might be a reasonable assumption that anyone who picks up the book is already a verse novel enthusiast – in which case, the extended length may be welcome!

There is an unfortunate absence of Indigenous voices in Weste’s collection. In the introduction, she explains that ‘as a genre, the verse novel reflects the historical privilege its poetic and novelistic progenitors’ (p. ix). She also points out that changes are occurring on the global level that indicate verse novels are beginning to contribute to a project of

revisioning and diversifying. Sadly, however, this is not showcased in this collection of interviews. Weste does highlight the significant achievements of Australian Indigenous verse novelists such as Sally Morgan, Ali Cobby Eckermann and Kirli Saunders. Each of these writers were contacted for an interview, but the outcome of this contact is not reflected in the collection of interviews, despite its length and breadth of inquiry. We can only hope that in the future, such collections and conversations about verse novels will include a greater Indigenous contribution.

Despite these limitations, Weste's collection of interviews offers a resolutely optimistic perspective on the verse novel form and what it can do, in its many varied permutations. Perhaps the greatest praise I can give this collection is that it has made me want to write a verse novel myself. If I ever undertake such a gargantuan task, I will be sure to keep Michelle A. Taylor's closing advice in mind:

This is the hardest writing
You will ever do. (p. 286)

Finally, she exhorts those who are game to try the form:

To take the stone and excavate
Sculpt, sculpt, take away, never add
Something beautiful may be inside. (p. 286)

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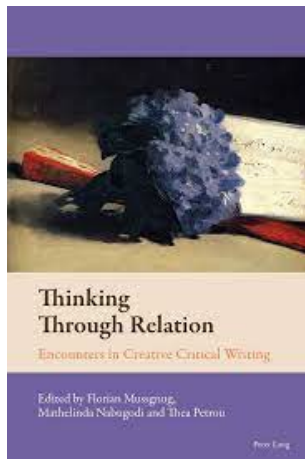
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TEXT review

Let's play: Encountering encounters of the creative critical kind

review by Amelia Walker



Florian Mussgnug, Mathelinda Nabugodi and Thea Petrou (Eds.)

Thinking Through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing

Peter Lang, Oxford, UK 2021

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What does it mean to see or read a work of art for the first time, or with fresh eyes? How can we mark this moment of creative beginning? We are disoriented and curious. We ponder, look for clues and let our gaze drift. This is an old world, but new to us, and newly transformed by our presence. It will eventually become familiar. (Mussgnug, Nabugodi & Petrou 2021, p. 17)

So conclude Florian Mussgnug, Mathelinda Nabugodi and Thea Petrou in the editorial ‘Prelude’ to their new book, *Thinking Through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing*, a festschrift of 18 chapters by writers, thinkers and artists honouring the career and contributions of Timothy Mathews. Mathews is a now-retired Professor at the University College of London (UCL) known especially for his innovations in and advocacy for critical creative writing practices in the United Kingdom and Europe. In this context, critical creative writing represents an eclectic assemblage of approaches to arts criticism, literary criticism, and related scholarly writing practices. Though diverse, practices of critical creative writing bear in common their resistance of academia’s formerly-dominant tendencies towards so-called distance and/or objectivity in critical writing. Instead, practitioners such as Mathews and those represented in *Thinking Through Relation* embrace and foreground their situated affective responses to the works they encounter, recognising ‘[q]uestions about art’ as ‘questions about life: about the point at which things begin to mean’ (p. 1).

The long passage I quote as an epigraph to this review reflects an attitude that characterises this otherwise wide-ranging, highly interdisciplinary collection. The chapter authors’ fields of practice span the visual arts and visual cultures, film, performance studies, French, language and translation studies, theatre, and comparative literature, among others. In addition to the works of Mathews himself, topics of focus include method, desire, surrealism, memory, identity, plurality, the archive, autotheoretical experimentation, game theory, and the contemporary macaronic (multilingual poetry), as well as studies of particular writers and artists including Cees Noteboom, Mary Shelley, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Jacques Roubaud. Collectively, they demonstrate the vast scope as well as strengths of creative critical writing. After reading, I went for a long hike through a national park nestled in the hills near my home. The pathways are networked and sprawling. I grew lost for a time, then chanced on a map. I thought to myself, *this is what the book I have just finished is, and means*. The critical pertains, after all, to crises and crossroads: places where distinct trails come together, and branch out again. This book is both a map and a landmark on a longer journey: it traces myriad ways via which its authors came to practice creative critical writing in the ways they do, and signals the equally vast potential terrains still ripe for travelling next.

The long passage I quoted earlier also describes the mood in which I came to both the book and to the writing of this review – somewhat disoriented, yet curious, eager to make this encounter, perhaps forge some relation, and maybe even be transformed. A curious metapo(i)etics pulses through the task I broach as a reviewer from a creative writing background, namely that of producing my critical (and creative) account of a volume itself all about critical writing and accounting as creative acts. Given themes the book emphasises, of aesthetic responsiveness as situated, contextual and contingent, I feel compelled to say something of the situation from which I work and the expectations, or perhaps desires, I bring. I have taken active interest in the creative critical writing movement for about four years now. My attention was first grasped Emily Orley and Katja Hilevaara’s excellent edited collection *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice* (2018), a review of which I penned for *TEXT*

vol. 23 no. 2 (Walker, 2019). I continue to follow updates about creative critical practices in the UK and beyond via the ‘CREATIVE-CRITICAL’ JISC-mail email list (JISC-mail, 2022) and the movement’s dedicated website (Creative Critical Writing, 2022).

As I’ve already indicated, practitioners in the critical creative movement work across diverse fields and interdisciplines, pursuing eclectically distinct interests, but align via their shared desire to write in ways that push beyond once-dominant traditions and constraints of scholarly distance, supposed objectivity, and dispassion. Creative critical scholars seek to surpass the bounds of the critical and the creative as genres and attitudes that in academia have too often been dichotomously – and reductively – divided. The writings they produce are at once creative and critical. An account of an artwork itself becomes a new work of art in language. The tone is typically personal, the experience embodied and the language po(i)etic: beyond the art critic’s conventional task of recounting and/or evaluating, it actively imagines and makes something new. Yet the rigor of this work remains undeniable, and indeed enhanced by thick descriptions of the responses and questions arts encounters provoke via which readers and writers join in the engaged, relational processes of thinking and feeling ways through. I was not, I confess, previously acquainted with Timothy Mathews’s work. From reading *Thinking Through Relation*, I now grasp his significance to the creative critical movement, and indeed to the ongoing struggles for recognition and acceptance of creative and arts-based work in academia broadly. In particular, the book makes clear Mathews’s strong sense of ethicality as a principle that should drive and frame both research and artistic making – and research *as* artistic making (or vice versa). Additionally, themes of games and playfulness, or ludic scholarship, proliferate across the chapters and appear to be among the many cherished gifts Mathews has shared.

For me as a creative writing researcher based on Kaurna Country (known in colonial terms as Adelaide, South Australia), the critical creative movement provides refreshing forms of insight and inspiration in that its practitioners broach familiar problems from slanted angles, using tactics that can complement those more familiar in my field. While the creative critical movement seeks to show the merits of creative writing as a critical act, creative writing research for me often involves struggles to prove creative writing’s capacities to operate critically – that is, to generate knowledges of demonstrable rigor and relevance, towards outcomes of engagement and impact. I am part of a university reading group called the critically creative reading and writing collective, in which we as a group primarily comprising early-career researchers and higher degree by research candidates in creative writing and other arts fields respond to critical articles via creative activities (poetry, fiction, sketching, collage, and so on) (see Telford et al., 2021). Although our objectives are different, our approach is partially informed by previous publications by creative critical scholars (especially Orley & Hilevaara, 2018), and *Thinking Through Relation* offers new possibilities for us to explore yet again. I likewise plan to share this book with supervision candidates and colleagues, and to reshape my undergraduate teaching and assessment practices to reflect the new possibilities it reveals. Although Mathews and most authors in *Thinking Through*

Relation come from disciplines other than creative writing, their aims, challenges, and principles resonate with ours; it seems to me highly likely that the struggles for recognition pursued in and across our distinct-yet-related fields must have borne some reciprocal benefits across the years, and that rich scope exists for ongoing dialogues towards shared goals.

Each of the chapters in *Thinking Through Relation* offers new and inspirational insights presented in aesthetically engaging and oft-innovative ways. For me, a particular highlight is Tim Beasley-Murray's astute chapter on 'the Game of Academia' and 'the Risk of Critical-Creative Writing', which head-on tackles some of the trickiest problems for academics in contemporary times – namely, the increasingly pressures to play according to rules and for prizes that often directly compromise the artistic and ethical objectives that drew us towards scholarship in the first place. Beasley-Murray compels academics to overcome 'limits and constraints that have lost their productive power' via critical creative writing as a practice that 'can productively and playfully step over the bounds of the magic circle, engaging a world beyond in serious play and playful seriousness' (Beasley-Murray, 2021, pp. 68–68). Another highlight for me is 'Honour', by Jenny Chamarette, which provides one of the book's most striking portrayals of Timothy Mathews as 'a gentle and supportive friend, peer and mentor' (Chamarette, 2018, p. 21). Chamarette wonders how to honour, through words, interpersonal and intellectual relations that exceed them. Her explorations of this problem lead into what I read as an exceptionally fine example of the difficult-to-nail braided essay form. Weaving in ideas from existentialism and phenomenology, Chamarette connects the challenges of honouring with the question of how to make room for heart in the neoliberal academy – specifically:

How to make space for embodiment, and sensuousness, in a way that does not become so entangled in the machinations of power that there is no space for it at all, except in screams or in silence? (p. 35)

Reflecting that 'body *is* mind, and mind is body', Chamarette poses that 'Honouring is an embodied relation. Isn't it?' (p. 35, original italics). This leads to recognition of 'writing as *existence itself*', or '[w]riting as being', and thus that 'writing and honouring is a serious sort of joy. The playful labour of criticism' (p. 36). Chamarette's weaving and winding approach boldly resists simple signposting or resolutions, making a strong illustration of the relationships between writing form and content so crucial throughout this collection as a whole. Placed as the first chapter following the 'Prelude', 'Honour' offers key insights into how one may read, or indeed encounter, subsequent authors' contributions. It was the kind of piece that sent me back to its beginning as soon as I finished, and then the end of the book sent me back yet again – a good sign, in my view.

Were room available in this review, I could make similarly enthusiastic remarks, and draw equally poetic excerpts from all chapters in *Thinking Through Relation*. As such space is not available, I instead close by emphasising that each chapter brings its own new and compelling encounters, and I urge readers to seek these for themselves. As I relayed earlier, I believe

those of us in the field of creative writing have much to gain from creative critical writing practices that, though drawn from other fields, share much in common with us in terms of goals, principles, and challenges too. I also perceive strong scope for reciprocity and collaboration between our distinct-yet-connected fields.

Let's make the encounter. Let's think. And relate. Let's play.

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TEXT review

“if my tongue were torn away / It would reform itself”

review by Philippa Moore



Ann-Marie Priest

My Tongue Is My Own: A Life of Gwen Harwood

La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., Melbourne, 2022

ISBN 9781760642341

Pb 419pp AUD29.75

Nearly thirty years after her death, Gwen Harwood remains one of Australia's most significant and distinctive poets. Author of more than 420 poems and libretti, Harwood is renowned for her brilliance and trickery, her technical virtuosity, her passions and furies. In her early career, through a number of mostly male pseudonyms, she was able to give voice to feminist issues at a time when women struggled for visibility and recognition. By the end of her life, Gwen Harwood was a public figure in her own right and a unique, powerful presence

in Australian literary circles. However, very little was known about her as a person, nor the experiences that gave rise to her extraordinary poems.

Known for being mercurial and mischievous, Harwood was fiercely protective of her privacy and ‘delighted in leading earnest scholars on a merry chase’ (p. 384). Two such scholars attempted to write her biography in the 1990s, towards the end of her life, but eventually abandoned the project, such was the enormous task. After her death, they each edited and published various portions of her correspondence that were allowed to be made public. The rest was embargoed indefinitely.

Against this context, Ann-Marie Priest has achieved a remarkable feat. *My Tongue is My Own: A Life of Gwen Harwood* is a meticulously researched and sensitively written biography spanning Gwen Harwood’s 75 years that gives a window into the poet’s complicated and passionate inner and outer lives. This window is not made of ‘smoked glass’ (‘Estuary’, p. 65) but is transparent and detailed, providing clarity on Gwen Harwood’s poetic inspirations, her frustrations, her obsessions, her longings and how, perhaps unwittingly, she became a symbol of liberation for women who felt torn between their creative yearnings and their domestic obligations. This was something she struggled with right to the end of her life.

To write this book, Ann-Marie Priest gained the trust and approval of Gwen Harwood’s literary executor, her eldest son John, who granted her access and permission to quote from all the correspondence and other unpublished material. She repays this trust admirably by negotiating tricky terrain with great sensitivity. Priest also interviewed several of Gwen Harwood’s friends and correspondents (or their descendants), but the story she constructs and the portrait of the poet that emerges is primarily from Gwen Harwood’s extensive archive of personal correspondence. An award-winning humanities scholar and senior lecturer at Central Queensland University, Priest is a lively and precise guide through the Harwood archives, the majority of which are held by the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland. Unsurprisingly, given her main research interest in Australian women writers, Priest is also a perceptive reader of Harwood’s poetry: she analyses and illuminates many individual poems from the official collections as well as unpublished verses and fragments that were written in letters and postcards.[1]

In *My Tongue is My Own*, Priest constructs a compelling narrative from many overlapping threads of Harwood’s life, transporting the reader effortlessly from her childhood in 1920s Brisbane to her last years in 1990s Hobart. She constructs a portrait of a playful, deeply intelligent and determined woman and artist who was in a constant battle between her desire for a harmonious domestic life and her burning need for creative expression.

As a young child, encouraged by a loving grandmother, Gwendoline Nessie Foster learned a deep, joyous appreciation of the wonders of the natural world and the preciousness of human connection. These became key themes of the poetry she went on to write: ‘all her life she would believe that moments of beauty, pleasure and human connection, no matter how fleeting, had a life-transforming power’ (p. 10). Gwen led a fascinating, almost bohemian,

life as a young woman in Brisbane in the 1930s and 1940s. She excelled at music and had an affair with her much older, married piano teacher; became a church organist and briefly joined a convent; studied philosophy; and wrote and read widely. When she was introduced to Bill Harwood through a mutual friend, Thomas (Tony) Riddell, she ‘fell head over heels in love’ (p. 71). Her life in Brisbane and the Second World War came to an end in the same year – she married Bill Harwood and moved to Tasmania, where she lived for the rest of her life: ‘in exile’, as she often put it.

* * *

*Even as I say How Beautiful How Charming
why do I feel that some demonic presence
hovers where too much evil has been done*
(‘1945’, p. 38)

The Harwoods first marital home was a cottage in Fern Tree, an area halfway up kunanyi/Mt Wellington. With no car, no piano and no job – and hence no money of her own – Gwen was lonely and isolated. Deprived of a musical instrument to express herself, she wrote letters and poetry. As her talent developed, so did her appetite for writing, but there was no guidance as to how she might manage to combine her desire to write with the requirements of her marriage which was extremely gendered according to the cultural mores of the time. She tried to ‘question some of the assumptions she had made about how her marriage would work’ which did not go well and as a result ‘she felt hampered by Bill’s disapproval’ (p. 106).

The Harwoods moved to a bigger family home on Augusta Road in Lenah Valley in 1952 and the cypress hedge that they planted (which, incidentally, is still there today) around the house proved a barricade in more ways than one. Gwen was still isolated and discouraged from making friends her husband didn’t approve of. By now she was a mother to four young children, overwhelmed by the ‘endless preparation of food and clothes’ (p. 111) with no time for herself. In her letters to intimate friends, Gwen reveals explosive anger, her head ‘so crammed with terrible ideas’ that the inability to express them might cause her to ‘explode & blow up Tasmania’ (p. 119). Her alter ego was Burning Sappho, ‘her poet-self who seethed with frustration and flared with rage’ (p. 114). This simmering inner conflict was eventually transformed into a series of powerful poems.

Gwen Harwood’s first taste of notoriety, and possibly the incident that she is still the most famous for, came in 1961 when *The Bulletin* accepted a sonnet she submitted under the male pseudonym Walter Lehmann, spelling out ‘FUCKALLEDITORS’ in an acrostic. This hidden message went unnoticed until after the issue was published, by which time word (and outrage) had spread, the edition sold out and even ‘a black market for illicit copies sprang up’ (p. 172). It was a literary hoax motivated by years of frustration. Gwen had been submitting poems, under her own name and under various male pseudonyms, for a few years at this point and

was infuriated that the less accomplished poems (in her view) she submitted under a male name were accepted more often than those under her own. This stunt, on which she colluded with Vincent Buckley, a friend and ‘fledgling poet-professor’ (p. 168), was meant to prove a point: ‘if editors wouldn’t take her seriously, then she would return the favour’ (p. 151).

The scandal that ensued once the stunt was discovered and Gwen was eventually outed as the offender was unexpected: reporters began appearing at Gwen’s door and she found herself stranded ‘in a desert of disapproval’ (p. 173) both on the national literary scene and in conservative early 1960s Hobart. She was also blindsided by Vincent Buckley who published an article in the same magazine shortly afterwards, distancing himself from the hoax and essentially selling her out. Gwen’s fury was sufficient to ‘boil all the water in Bass Strait’ (p. 175) and she was also deeply hurt that prominent poets who privately supported her would not do so publicly. The similar Ern Malley hoax of the 1940s had made heroes of its (male) culprits, but she was a mere ‘Tas. Housewife’ being threatened with obscenity charges. But if Australia’s older, more conservative poets were horrified by the hoax, its younger ones were admiring and enthralled.

A good biography of a poet should send the reader, full of curiosity, to the work itself, and *My Tongue is My Own* certainly achieves this. Ann-Marie Priest not only provides enlightening and fascinating historical and biographic contexts for the poems but intriguing analysis and interpretations of them as well. It is highly recommended to have a volume of the poetry to hand so you can read the poems as Priest refers to them. She showcases the genesis of poems that demonstrate Gwen Harwood’s ‘characteristic exuberance and inventiveness’ (p. 269), poems that are ‘playful, ecstatic, openly erotic’ (pp. 276–77), verses that explore ‘the spiritual wisdom that comes from sexual experience’ (p. 277) and ‘the destructive impulses of her own alter ego’ (p. 306). Priest also shows how Gwen engaged with the dark history of Tasmania, particularly once she moved down to Oyster Cove, an area south of Hobart where, a century earlier, First Nations people displaced by the genocide of the Black War were sent to a station ‘where it was hoped they would die out’. Living on this land where there had been so much suffering, ‘her only recourse was to shape a prayer for forgiveness’ (p. 284). When she moved to Oyster Cove, Gwen started keeping a daily journal of her activities using a small desk diary with only a small allotted space for each day. Priest notes Gwen ‘became a master of this compressed genre, able to convey the tone of her day without a wasted word’ (p. 285). This translated over to her poetry as well, where she had an ‘extraordinary flow of invention’ (p. 264) but remarkable restraint.

* * *

– *Give me your hand. The same pure wind, the same*

*light-cradling sea shall comfort us, who have
built our ark faithfully.*

(‘Iris’, p. 95)

Priest’s interpretation of the poem ‘Iris’ which symbolises the Harwood marriage, the life they made together, the sturdy ‘faithfully built’ vessel that would carry them both ‘no matter how seductive the glimmering depths below’ (p. 245) is particularly interesting, as is its surrounding biographic context. Publication of this poem made Bill Harwood furious and hurt at what he perceived as an invasion of his privacy. He had never been particularly interested in or supportive of Gwen’s work in the past, but at this point in the marriage new battles, Priest explains, were being fought in the ‘old war between Bill’s mechanistic view of the world and Gwen’s spiritual one’ (p. 278). An individual’s responsibility to their talents – to be, as another favourite poet put it, ‘a good steward of your gifts’ (Kenyon) – was also on Gwen’s mind as she entered her fifties, around the time she wrote ‘Iris’, as her children grew up and left home, her husband appeared disinterested in seeing the world with her and she realised time was ‘waxing late’ (p. 255). Though, in a profound way, Gwen saw Bill as ‘her closest intellectual peer, and the pole against which she measured her own trajectory ... her ballast’ (p. 256). It becomes clear to the reader that while they had periods of harmony and contentment, Gwen and her husband were always on fairly different trajectories.

Even bearing in mind that it was a marriage of its time, the ‘emotional blows’ (p. 330) that Bill dealt out whenever he was displeased with his wife make the modern reader flinch in discomfort. Her husband’s withholding of approval also felt physically wounding to Gwen – ‘the equivalent in a drunken wife basher would be a blow in the face I suppose’ (p. 342). Even their son John Harwood has admitted that, today, his father’s behaviour reads like coercive control. It pained me – as a fellow Tasmanian free-spirited feminist – to learn that Gwen Harwood never travelled outside of Australia, as she longed to do. Equally painful was Priest’s recounting that after a long day of travelling back to Hobart from a literary festival interstate, Gwen still had to make Bill’s dinner (p. 360), and that when she was undergoing cancer treatment and friends brought meals round, ‘Bill would complain about the quality of the food and sometimes refuse to eat it’ (p. 369). Around this time, homesick for Brisbane and realising she had spent nearly fifty winters in Tasmania, Gwen wrote to her friend Ann Jennings: ‘Almost all of my life here has been spent longing for the *other life*: warmth, praise when things were worth praising, friends made welcome, music, holidays...’ (p. 373). The extent to which Gwen was trapped by the demands of her marriage and her time, her thwarted attempts to subvert those demands, and subsequently occasionally needing to ‘go deep into the bush on Knocklofty ... and weep and rage’ (p. 322) is truly heartbreaking to read about.

And then of course is the ‘rage of poetry’ (p. 322) which Ann-Marie Priest and John Harwood, in his insightful essay published in the ABR to mark the publication of this biography, agree on: Gwen Harwood almost thrived on constraints. She needed them for the rage and incision

and blazing fury of her poetry. Even her close friend (and later lover) Peter Bennie points out to Gwen that her difficult marriage ‘had given her work ‘rigour’’ (p. 343). It is also hard to argue with John Harwood’s sober assessment:

The paradox at the heart of the marriage is that if my mother hadn’t married Bill Harwood (or had left him as soon as we children were grown), she might have lived a far happier life, but we wouldn’t have the poems.

Ann-Marie Priest, to her great credit, is very even-handed in her construction of the difficult Harwood marriage. She demonstrates, through detailed accounts of their life together, that Gwen and Bill were opposites in many respects and captures them both in their very human complexities. Unsurprisingly, Priest’s narrative is primarily through Gwen’s eyes, but she manages to keep the troubling behaviour of Bill Harwood, and Gwen’s acceptance of it, to the facts, as much as she was able to find and assemble them. In doing so, with minimal speculation, she manages to evoke great empathy for her subject. Of course, as John Harwood points out in his essay, Gwen was the only one who committed any of the details of the marriage to paper so we only have her side of things. But, thanks to Priest’s reconstruction, it’s a very compelling side in this reviewer’s opinion: ‘forty years of marriage, forty years of the same dynamic playing out between them in which she sought his approval and he withheld it...how different her life might have been if he had been her champion’ (p. 331).

* * *

*I choose my life, choose to be woven
in other lives*

(‘Littoral’, p. 70)

If her poetry is the spine of this biography, then Gwen Harwood’s many intense and passionate friendships, some of which morphed into physical affairs, are its limbs. Priest charts and recreates these meticulously through the voluminous archive of correspondence, full of heartfelt declarations, playful postcards and the revelations and searing honesty she reserved for those she felt truly understood her. These rich, meaningful relationships and connections continued until her dying day and the passions of her youth did not fade with age. Priest writes of Gwen finding herself, at 57, meeting an old flame at Hobart airport and ‘shaken to the bones when this man in his 60s got off the plane streaming with the original radiance’ (p. 298). Gwen also had loving friendships with women which had ‘romantic and erotic dimensions’ (p. 364). Priest, despite documenting the many heartaches and frustrations of Gwen’s life, threads the narrative with the belief that sustained Gwen to her very end, that ‘joy is possible, in spite of age and mutilation and lost loves and life’s inevitable miscalculations’ (p. 324) and this joy was very much found in her friendships.

My Tongue is My Own is full of delightful and illuminating small details – descriptions of Gwen’s childhood home and the boarding school she taught at for a time in Brisbane; the details of her daily life caring for four children; the picnic food Gwen packs for a day trip on the sailboat; the native bush and bird life around her Oyster Cove home where she and Bill ‘retired’; even some of Gwen’s vivid dreams, which are surprisingly revealing. For a Tasmanian, this biography is a particular treat to read as it is full of many familiar names, streets and sites. The inter-connectedness of Hobart and how one’s life can so easily and coincidentally intersect with those of significant, well-known names – even today – is highly amusing! I loved the details of Hobart in the 1950s and 1960s when Gwen transformed from ‘Tas. Housewife’ to poet of note, which was also the Hobart my parents grew up in. References to long gone relics of my own childhood in the 1980s (the bright red revolving SBT sign, for example) raised a few nostalgic smiles.

Gwen Harwood fully intended for there to be a biography of her life – she had tried to write a memoir in the early 1980s but abandoned it when she realised ‘she did not want to tell the whole truth of her life in stark prose’ (p. 304). In the early 1990s, in what the reader comes to learn was typical Gwen style, she entertained the possibility of a biography with two separate writers, stringing both along for a time. She told Gregory Kratzmann he was welcome to turn on his tape recorder to record their conversations, ‘but if he did, ‘I’ll lie.’’ (p. 345). Kratzmann signed a publishing deal with Oxford University Press for the biography, while Gwen assured Alison Hoddinott, her long-time friend, that she was still her authorised biographer. Priest goes on to explain that Hoddinott, probably sensing this was getting messy, withdrew from the project, and Greg Kratzmann then embarked on the official biography, which was never finished or approved.

The life of Gwen Harwood holds so many pockets of comfort, reassurance and relatability for creative women today – from the seemingly timeless quandary of how to best balance work and motherhood, to sacrifices made for a harmonious family life, chasing the arrival fallacy of publication, and previously close friendships falling away or turning toxic. Lack of older female poets in the public eye in Australia meant that Gwen had few role models; all her mentors and “poetry gurus” were men who, while supportive, could not always empathise. After all, they were not the ones who had to interrupt their writing ‘to put the porridge on’ (p. 226), as she had to. As time went on, Gwen herself became a beacon of hope for other women writers. She appeared in a chapbook in 1982 as a role model for emerging female poets and also worked as a tutor in writing at the College of Advanced Education on Hobart’s eastern shore during the late 1970s where many of her students were women, ‘housewives doing their HSC English after years away from school’ (p. 312). They were inspired hearing that Gwen herself had spent years ‘chopping up cucumbers, unpublished and unencouraged’ (p. 312).

Gwen Harwood’s insistence on carving out space for herself and her work amidst cultural and domestic constraints was heroic in many respects, and yet reading about the life that Ann-Marie Priest has so carefully constructed in this book highlighted for me that women are still ‘striving against old prejudices’ (p. 198). Priest points out that Gwen did not openly regret

her choice of marriage and motherhood over life as an artist, ‘but she did regret that she had been forced to make it’ (p. 160), a sentiment that still feels painfully relevant now.

Layered and thorough without ever being onerous, *My Tongue is My Own* is an incredible achievement. In the brief introduction, Priest explains the chosen title:

Owning her tongue was about claiming the right not only to speak but also to be silent – even to lie. It was about using her voice as she chose: to hide or to reveal herself, to try out different characters, different truths and possibilities... Above all, it was about claiming her freedom as a poet. This she did – and Australian poetry would never be the same. (p. 5)

In *My Tongue is My Own*, Gwen Harwood has the biography – as well as the empathy, insight and esteem – that she longed for and deserved. It is a masterful, compelling and immensely readable biography of an enigmatic figure of Australian literature, a woman of incandescent talent, passions and indefatigable spirit whose voice could so easily have been lost were it not for her determination to be heard. Women writing poetry in Australia today owe her a great deal.

Notes

[1] In fact, the title of this review is from a poem written on the back of a circular postcard she sent to poet Norman Talbot, just after their affair had begun (p. 260).

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winning blogger in the medium's formative years. Philippa's PhD project, a novel inspired by the life of convict entrepreneur Maria Lord, has received a 2023 KSP Residential Fellowship. In her writing, and especially in her current research at UTAS where she is affiliated with the university's Writing Lives research group, Philippa very much enjoys traversing the blurry borders between fiction and facts.



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TEXT review

Afro-irreal dark fantasy unleashed

review by Dominique Hecq



Eugen Bacon
Chasing Whispers
Raw Dog Screaming Publishing, US
ISBN 9781947879447
Pb 194pp AUD21.81



Eugen Bacon
An Earnest Blackness
Anti-Oedipus Press, US
ISBN 978-0999153581
Hb 122pp AUD39.94

Under review here are two smashing books by Eugen Bacon: *Chasing Whispers* and *An Earnest Blackness*, both snapped up by a US publisher, the twin houses of Anti-Oedipus Press and Raw Dog Screaming. One is a collection of Afro-Australian stories, the other a selection of essays that interrogates black writing and black speculative fiction, including some of its author's in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter.

Both books testify to the openness and excursiveness of Bacon's work and to the ways in which she enters into dialogue with Africa from the vantage point of Australia via the open gateway of genre. At the outset of *An Earnest Blackness*, discussing Titan's 2021 *Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda* edited by Jesse J. Holland, Bacon gives the reader a clue as to the source of the title of her fiction collection: 'These are the legends whispered in the jungle, myths and unconquered men and women

and the land they love' (p. 13). 'Unconquered' and 'love' are key words to approach both works, literally and metaphorically.

Eugen Bacon has long overcome the gate-keepers of Speculative Fiction. From *Claiming T-MO* (2019) to *Danged Black Thing* (2021) and *Mage of Fools* (2022), she has asserted herself as an Afro-Australian writer with a unique approach to the genre. In *Chasing Whispers* her idiosyncratic brand of writing receives a name: Afro-irreal Dark Fantasy. In his gripping introduction, D. Harlan Wilson, editor-in-chief at Anti-Oedipus Press, defines irreal narratives as follows:

Broadly speaking, the stories in *Chasing Whispers* are picturesque explorations of minds and bodies that dabble in multiple genres. Foremost among these genres is irrealism. This is what caught my eye when I initially read the book. Irreal narratives combine dreamlike episodes or moments with absurdist undercurrents in such a way that readers are at once estranged by the writing and familiar with it... (p. 9)

Like *Danged Black Thing*, *Chasing Whispers* is a bold selection of genre-bending stories told from multiple points of views in a combination of fantasy, noir, thriller and literary fiction interspersed with African legends and lyrical existential vignettes in 13 tableaux vivants that 'depict "reality" better than "reality" itself because they can account for conscious and unconscious realms simultaneously' (p. 9). But here the stories are linked not through plot, but rather through theme and mood. The theme relates to a black protagonist who longs for home and intimacy; the mood is conjured by the recurring phrase which comes from the titular story: 'A Deep and terrible Sadness'. This device imbues the stories with an enveloping atmosphere that expresses both longing and distance between protagonists.

The collection of thirteen tales is enlivened by Bacon's unrelenting passion for all things African and her fascination with African mores and myths, beliefs and superstitions, foods and landscapes. But the book is much more than a mere concatenation of pieces treating Bacon's trademark preoccupations with untrademarked stylistics. As a collection, *Chasing Whispers* is surprisingly cohesive from first to last; the correspondences between stories are fecund, and one might even say "organic". To be sure, the individual stories are often gems in their own right, and at least two have been published before. Aptly, the opening story is thematically incipient and functions as a kind of foreword. Consider this italicised fragment:

The whispers are a brush of bottles and blurs, keys and tingles gathering speed around her ears. They rub against her skin, rotten camel hair imprinting bile-green images and afterimages of recursive disbelief in the shape of intestines. It's hard to tell why the sludge of black mud is streaming behind her eyes, so she lies to herself that it's a dimension, as the water goes cold. (original italics, p. 17)

Could this be the navel of Eugen Bacon's poetics? Or, to relinquish the Freudian reference, its guts?

The individual stories stage a montage detailing how women and children are ghosted by patriarchy, both institutional and attitudinal. There are tales of encounter, injustice, dislocation, and grief but above all of continuity of culture and identity, resilience, survival and renewal. Questions of difference and assumptions of so-called rightness arise, suggesting that the realisation of "different", a term dear to Bacon and used as adjective, adverb and noun, often comes through damaging experiences. Nonetheless, longing is the central player in these interlinked short stories set in Africa and Australia. Bacon's characters are questing individuals resisting the hand that life has dealt them. They negotiate

relationships that are fraught with tension – sexual, racial, cultural – all affected by an intimation of who they are and might become despite being caught up in a shrinking, hybrid world. For there is magic, too.

Here generic boundaries are transgressive and chimerical. Here the tide-like pull of times, traditions and conventions breaks. Some stories spill onwards with no element of closure. Here are the last words from ‘Nyamizi, the skinless one’, a tale of initiation:

‘Yes, All-Mother.’

‘Come,’ she smiled and took Nyamizi’s hand. ‘Let me tell you more about Ngolo Ade.’ (p. 64)

In the hands of a less capable writer, these words could have been the perfect hook for a linked story. It’s not.

Of these bold stories ‘Black Witch, Snow Leopard’, an urgent, unending tale that reinvents ‘the legend of the black witch and the snow leopard who vacillate between now and death’ (p. 100), is a stand out. What strikes is the mingled poise, inventiveness and emotional charge of the prose in a collection that otherwise zigs and zags with intensity. The mother–daughter relationship evoked here is ‘full of longing, full of haunting’ (p. 100). This raises a peculiar question about real experience, real creatures, real objects in unreal art. How far are we to take their reality as there? What does unreal fiction has to do with representation? Perhaps it would be naively linear to even attempt to answer these questions.

An Earnest Blackness collects reflections, evocations, commentary, criticism and humour. It is an electrifyingly bold collection of personal essays which strike a balance of exuberance and restraint, addressing a number of question and themes that recur throughout Bacon’s writing: genre, history, colour, gender, class and, indirectly, the question of audience. They flaunt a refusal of language that is not accessible, belying a reaction against academicism readers of TEXT will be familiar with from pieces Bacon published as far as 2012 as a fledgeling scholar grappling with methodologies then new to her, a scientist. They smoothly play off against the oppressive control and manipulation of words academic writing sometimes displays.

In fact, the essays are given room to stretch out and let the reader enter the specificity of a writer’s world. Spanning past and present, they consider work by other writers ranging from Ngugi Wa Thiongo to Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Sheree Renée Thomas to Roland Barthes, Jorge Luis Borges and Suyi Davies Okunbowa, in a gesture that charts the literary landscape Bacon has made hers. So, the collection opens with a review of current trends in black speculative fiction within a historical, literary and ideological context that feed into *Chasing Whispers*, rhizome-like. This rhizomatic structure is sustained throughout this slim volume in looping fashion from ‘Worldbuilding in Ngugi Wa Thiongo’ *The Perfect Nine* to ‘African Creation Myths’, ‘Becoming Visible’, ‘I Went Looking for Afros and ‘Afrofuturism’, then haphazardly followed through increasingly personally inflected pieces which take the reader to Melbourne in the not so distant here and now of Black Lives Matter that puts into perspective Bacon’s doctoral dissertation, including *Claiming T-Mo*, her first book.

These versatile essays are argumentative, lucid, grounded in research, sustained by lively intelligence and bright ideas, yet also ludic and at times mischievous. They show us that writing depends on people,

time, politics, ethics, intuition and sometimes, contradiction. A case in point is the seriously hilarious dialogue in ‘Inhabitation: Genni and I’ which pits Eugen against her writing persona.

None of this means that I agree with everything Eugen Bacon says, for she talks about her subject matter from the inside out. Then, of course, the function of discourse, theoretical or imaginative, is to provoke lively disagreement, as the last essay that returns us to fiction with ‘Making *Claiming T-Mo: A Black Speculative Fiction*’ not only demonstrates, but performs.

With these two remarkable collections, I declare Afro-irreal Dark Fantasy unleashed. Both books are handsomely produced and brilliantly edited. Read them for a dose of high-voltage energy and provocative fun.

Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives on unceded Wurundjeri land, Melbourne. Hecq writes across genres and disciplines – and sometimes across tongues. Her creative works include a novel, four collections of stories, twelve books of poetry and two one-act plays. A runner-up in the Carmel Bird Digital Award, Smacked and other stories of addiction is fresh off the press.



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TEXT review

Anyway, do shadows speak?

review by Julia Prendergast



Dominique Hecq

Smacked and other stories of addiction

Spineless Wonders, Strawberry Hills NSW 2021

ISBN 9781925052732

Pb 128pp AUD24.99

The title of this review is taken from the superbly restrained love story ‘Beyond the Doubting of Shadows’, from Dominique Hecq’s most recent short story collection, *Smacked and other stories of addiction* (2021, pp. 87–92). Do shadows speak? This question ghosts each of the stories and the umbra that binds them. Hecq is in conversation with the complexity of the question through the depiction of various forms of addiction, habit, and substance abuse – casting shadows, blocking the light that eclipses sources of illumination – ‘Addiction comes in rainbow, unrainbow’ (p. 20). Hecq speaks in tongues of refraction, from a number of fictional vantage points.

As a composite picture, the stories attend reverently to the text's opening epigraphs: *What is addiction really? It is a language that tells us about a plight that must be understood; Style is a function of theme* (Alice Miller; Julian Barnes, emphases in original). How does Hecq do this? Through concrete and specific detail as crescent moon – penumbra – addiction, habit, and substance abuse, *always* about something else – regret, grief, trauma, loss, desire – lurking, shadow-speaking, in alterity.

In *The Art of Time in Fiction*, Joan Sibler (2009, p. 5) suggests that 'All fiction has to contend with the experience of time passing'. The stories in *Smacked* focus time as a kind of conflict of subjectivity – a deep longing for connectivity undergirded by a compulsion or resignation toward aloneness. An overarching shadow, sparklit, speaks to matters of love and fraught intimacy – a concern that we may, ever, have only our embodied relationship to moments in time – speak, shadows, speak – 'High up the crack in the rock is a threesome of bats hanging and silent' (Hecq, 2021, p. 121).

If you break between 'sittings' – or walk/reading as the case may be – who can sit still when reading *Smacked*? – you are likely to dream in the way shadow-speak wires us to dream – circling stories that refuse to stand alone in the mind's eye: 'A half-cut moon against the crescent sky' (Hecq, 2021, p. 110). Books that do not end, will never end, leave us with questions. At the heart of this book is a fixation upon moments-in-time – time past and absent-present – embodied moments, past and passing.

Smacked puts me in mind of Veronica O'Keane's *A Sense of Self: Memory, the Brain, and Who We Are*. O'Keane investigates how we make memories and how memory makes us. In the foreword to the text, O'Keane (2021, p. vii, emphasis in original) addresses a discrepancy in the translation of Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, 'initially translated in 1954 as *Remembrance of Things Past*' and later, in 1992 'to the more accurate *In Search of Lost Time*', suggesting that:

The original translation's 'remembrance of' suggests a passive recall of memories from a hidden and fixed repository, while the later translation's 'in search of' suggests an active pursuit of a past that is not lost. Neuroscience [O'Keane suggests] has almost caught up with Proust in the interval between the translations.

Hecq's obsessive return to the riddle of past and passing moments, and their impact upon us, is consistent with O'Keane's analysis of memory – to moments in time that are rendered timeless and hold us in that ever-shifting (skin-thinking) shadowland.

The brevity of short-form writing makes it an apt vessel for capturing the haunting incompleteness of human experience. Hecq's stories are next level – they are the remarkably restrained achievements of a storyteller-poet who knows constraint, who understands precisely when to opt in (or more pertinently *out*) of the light. Individually and collectively, the stories are taut, tensile, restrained, and deeply associative – shadowy word-webs, focalised through highly idiosyncratic 'register[s] of intelligence' (Wharton, 1997, p. 63).

Edith Wharton provides the most apt description I have encountered, about the capacity of literary fiction to convey feeling. Wharton says:

The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, *be an event in the history of a soul*, and the use of the ‘descriptive passage,’ and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of an intelligence. (Wharton, 1997, p. 63, my emphasis)

Hecq examines the conundrum and contradiction of human experience through carefully crafted detail, meshed sensory detail – emotionally smacking – and *always* an event in the history of a soul.

How is this act of conveyance possible? I sidestep to a question from Gordon Weaver who asks: ‘in how small a space can [we] create the felt presences that animate successful stories’ (in Shapard & Thomas 1983, p. 228). Hecq captures felt presences as a collection of fractured subjectivities – ‘the moon and its many faces’ (Hecq, 2021, p. 20). The range in *Smacked* – the vastness of the registers – the way we are called to read them individually and will never adequately separate them – this leaves me reeling. Hecq probes us to consider our fractured subjectivity within the context of the lives we live, have lived, the dreams we dream, will dream, our irreconcilable extremes – ‘part of the glowing mellow darkness but sure and solid as amber’ (p. 79). In reading *Smacked*, we are called to question the impact of moments-in-time on our subjectivity – interrogatively.

This process of interrogation prompts me to ask myself – again and endlessly – how it is possible that story-work can enter our affect cycle as if it were lived experience. Through shadow speak – ‘as if [we have] memories of having memories’ (Hecq, 2021, p. 21). At every turn, we are pushed to look beyond addiction (in all its guises), substance abuse (and all its carnage), habit (as lure and shackle). Hecq achieves this by writing in deep homage to the crucial relationship between idiosyncratic voice and sharply rendered detail. As if she were writing in response to Hecq’s *Smacked*, Lydia Davis asks (1983, p. 230):

What is certain, in any case, is that we are more aware of the great precariousness and the possible brevity of our lives than we were in the past, our lives being actually more precarious than they used to be, and for this reason, perhaps, we express not only more despair but also more urgency in some of our literature now, this urgency also being expressed as brevity itself.

Urgency is apt. I read the collection twice, in shadowy succession – ‘It’s been a long time since [I’ve] been able to think’ (Hecq, 2021, p. 71). I read in deep reverence for the restraint of the authorial register, ghosting the fictional registers – the deft hand behind the word-work. This book begs returning to, even as it will ‘destroy all that seemed evident and make solitude exhilarating, complete, irrelevant’ (p. 89).

In a multi-cast shadow, the voices in *Smacked* become inextricably woven together in the reader's mind – a cacophony of shadow-speak – *not* because they are indistinguishable but because they are acutely realised, held at intimate arm's length by a storyteller-poet who orbits the theme of moments-in-time as felt presences from diverse vantage points – wondering, uselessly, if 'we can perhaps at least hear ourselves unfeel' (Hecq, 2021, p. 69).

Unsurprisingly, *Smacked* was awarded runner up in the Carmel Bird Digital Literary Award. A tribute to the way Hecq wrestles with the riddle of experience, the shadowy distance between the remember and the remembered event, the sly cunning of memory – our entrapment in revisiting the im/perfect shadow and the light – umbra-penumbra-antumbra – distinct components of a shadow, created by a light source that touches an opaque object. Hecq addresses not only the question of whether shadows speak, which is a given in this collection, but the question of umbra-penumbra-antumbra – 'where do those shadows come from?' (p. 91).

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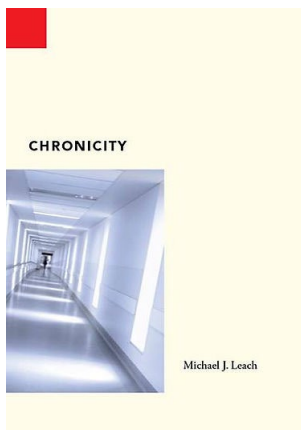
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TEXT review

Matters of form

review by Ian Gibbins



Michael J. Leach

Chronicity

Melbourne Poets Union, Melbourne VIC 2020

ISBN: 978-0-648-96791-0

Pb 28pp

How poetry looks on the page matters. For English-language poetry based on conventional patterns of rhyme and rhythm, the line forms the basic structural unit. Each line contains a more or less fixed number of stresses or beats, and ends in a word that fits the overall rhyming scheme. The lines are then grouped into verses, each of which may follow a similar pattern or which may vary with the larger scale organisation of the piece. The tight linkage between visual structure and sound is so pervasive, we tend to take it for granted. Indeed, for many readers, this is what defines a “poem”.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, writers began experimenting new ways to link the look of a poem with its underlying sound or its subject matter or both. In his ‘Un Coup de Dés (A Throw of the Dice)’, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) radically disperses text around and across the page, in some cases using diverse font faces and sizes. The effect is dramatic, forcing the reader to slow down and take notice of the shifts in text placement and its emphasis, while navigating the white space of the page. Mallarmé himself said of this work: ‘The ‘blanks’, in effect, assume importance and are what is immediately most striking; versification always demanded them as a surrounding silence ... I don’t transgress against this order of things, I merely disperse its elements’ (1994, p. 121).

Amidst the rich artistic ferment of Paris after World War I, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) published his *Calligrammes* in 1918. In these poems, Apollinaire arranged the words on the page to variously represent the object, the setting, or the internal thoughts described by the poem. In some cases, such as ‘Il Pleut (It’s Raining)’ these functions merge as the text of the poem fragments and streams down the page (Shattuck, 1971, p. 171). Around the same time that Apollinaire was writing his *Calligrammes*, the DADA poets were pushing the sound and look of poetry to further extremes. For example, the work of Tristan Tzara (1896–1963) and Hugo Ball (1886–1927) not only reduced language to its basic phonemes, but laid it out across the page with a visual appearance more akin to musical scores (eg. Tzara’s ‘Fever of the Male’, 1919; Huelsenbeck, 1920/1993, p. 31) or advertising posters (eg. Ball’s ‘KARAWANE’, 1916–17; Huelsenbeck, 1920/1993, p. 61).

Although separated by more than 50 years, the typographical experiments of Apollinaire and the Dada poets laid the groundwork for the so-called concrete poetry and its variants, such as typewriter art (Tullet, 2014) and VisPo (visual poetry, Hill & Vassilkis, 2012), that emerged in the 1960s (Williams, 1967/2013) and is still going strong (Perloff, 2021). In recent years, the visual appearance of poetry has taken on a more dynamic form via the medium of video. Often taking design cues from video art, animation or advertising, poetry videos introduce an additional temporal element into the ways in which poetry text can be displayed, far beyond what can be achieved on the printed page (for more see Tremlett, 2021).

How text looks is central to most of the 16 poems in *Chronicity*, the first published collection by Michael J. Leach. More akin in style to Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* than to Dada or concrete poetry, the poems all share the same typeface and font size as they assume their various forms on the page. Whilst some poems have a conventional layout, other stream, arc or step from one line to the next.

Leach has a PhD in pharmacoepidemiology with an active career in biomedical research and teaching. Amongst other things, he has published on novel ways of visualising clinical data

(Leach et al., 2021). It is probably not surprising then that his poetry deals with different aspects of emotional, mental and physical health. In doing so, the poems often use the specific language of pharmacology, physiology and anatomy to strong effect; an effect which is generally reinforced by their physical structure.

'The Pharmacokinetics of Paracetamol' (originally published in *Cordite Poetry Review* 83: *Mathematics*) initially reads as an introductory lecture to students on the subject, or perhaps the information a clinician may give to a patient. Indeed, it contains a precise mix of technical terminology and vernacular familiarity that tries to span the language gap between the specialist and general public:

A paracetamol tablet
won't hurt
you; it will alleviate
your aches.
That white tablet'll
move down
your GIT and swiftly
disintegrate. (p. 3)

Twice along the way, the text morphs into the shape of the mathematical relation that describes how the levels of a drug in the body change with time:

The chemicals will move between two compartments: blood & urine. The [metabolite]-time plot will reach its max then drop by half-lives. The area under the curve will then capture metabolic kinetics. (p. 4)

‘Blue Thought’ (winner of the 2015 UniSA Mental Health and Wellbeing Poetry Competition) moves into the area of mental health via a most successful interaction between content and form. Each section for the bulk of the poem has a sharp triangular shape as line length waxes and wanes in a regular pattern, reinforced by repeating phrases that frame the narrative evolving through the longer lines:

I
Am
Afraid
That I shan’t
Be able to think
In a straight line for
For yet another 24-hour cycle.
My old train of blue
Thought is still
Moving in a
Jagged
Line. (p. 6)

The overall effect is one of an oscillating, peaking, wave, until, as we come to the end of the poem, the wave breaks and flows to a new space.

Some of the poems use technical language and spatial arrays in a more light-hearted way. ‘An Abbreviated Case Study in Geriatric Orthopaedics’ takes a side-ways look (almost literally) of the arcane abbreviations that populate clinical documents. It begins:

The MD came in and spoke of	
a cheery older lady from the	ER
with a severely fractured	NOF
that would require a	THR.
	(p. 12)

(For reference: ER stands for ‘emergency room’, NOF for ‘neck of femur’ and THR stands for ‘total hip replacement’.)

Several of the poems employ rhymes and half-rhymes in addition to, or sometimes instead of, an extended visual pattern of the lines. On occasion, this makes a poem feel over-worked to my ear. But other readers may interpret the repetition of sounds as a re-enforcing element, perhaps representing the cycling, potentially numbing, passage of time, as in ‘The Waiting Rooms’:

I wait in this hot room	Soft lights chase away gloom
I am on red alert	Sky blue eases the hurt
My tears are stained scarlet	O my angel Charlotte
There's a stranger close by	She glows in my mind's eye

(p. 19).

Notwithstanding the carefully worked layouts, the knowledgeable use of technical terms, and forays into rhyming schemes, the dominant voice in the poems is generally a straight-forward, plain-speaking one within a strong narrative or lyric framework. As illustrated in the examples above, this renders the poems very approachable, with only a short emotional distance between the poet and reader. But in a few of the poems, this approach runs the risk of becoming too prosaic to hold the reader's attention. So 'Frida Kahlo's Backbone', written in response to her painting *The Broken Column* (1944), reads more like a summary of a Wikipedia article rather than an interpretation or re-contextualisation of the original work:

Frida Kahlo was born in July 1907
 in old Coyoacán, Mexico.
 She was six years old going on 47
 when polio struck her down.
 She survived with a shriveled leg
 and threw herself into sports. (p. 16).

Taken together, the poems in *Chronicity* comprise a strong first collection from Dr Leach. Few poets have the technical background and requisite skill to combine the concept-rich language of biomedical research and practice into poems that speak directly to the reader with such effectiveness. Even fewer are willing to take up the challenge of experimenting with form beyond the conventional line break. Most of the poems in this collection demonstrate that Dr Leach has succeeded on all these levels. With such a foundation, he is well on his way to developing a unique presence in Australian poetry at the nexus of art and science.

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Ian Gibbins is a poet, video artist and electronic musician living on unceded Kaurna land in South Australia. His poetry has been widely published in Australia and overseas, and includes four books. His video poetry, video art and audio art have been exhibited to acclaim at festivals, installations, galleries and public art displays around the world. Until he retired in 2014, Ian was an internationally recognised neuroscientist and Professor of Anatomy at Flinders University, South Australia.



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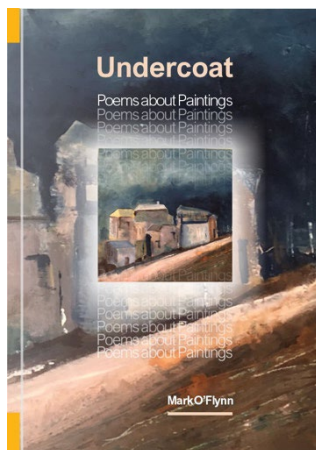
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TEXT review

Map without scale

review by Michele Seminara



Mark O'Flynn

Undercoat

Liquid Amber Press, Melbourne VIC 2022

ISBN 978-0-6450449-4-2

49pp AUD25.00

Undercoat by Mark O'Flynn is billed as a book of ekphrastic 'poems about paintings' but is as much a book of poems about painters and the process of painting and viewing. For beyond a mere depiction of the paintings that inspired them, these poems offer a beguiling presentation of frames-within-frames and perspectives that gesture to what is out of sight, beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the frame.

To begin at the end, the last poem in the book, 'Portrait of David Wenham', closes: 'As with/ the blank canvas of the actors' craft, like / us all, he comes across as all undercoat.' (p. 41)

It is surely no accident that this poem lends its title to *Undercoat*. As we shall come to see, every painting reinterpreted as a poem in the book is an 'undercoat', a base for which the poet, and we as reader/viewer, come to re-imagine the artworks with our inner eye.

Take the opening poem of the collection, 'Man Reading a Newspaper', which depicts a man sitting in his singlet among the still-smoking ruins of a burnt abode casually reading 'the funnies', his insouciance seemingly at odds with the 'apocalypse' that surrounds him. The poet skillfully guides our inner eye from visual detail to visual detail as he scans the painting for a meaningful narrative before finally alighting upon:

But look, what's that at his feet? Isn't that
a jerry-can of two-stroke? Ah, I see, it's not his house,
he doesn't care, he's the one who's torched the lot,
kicking back with the paper, job well done. (p. 2)

This technique of guiding the readers' "viewing" through a gradual revelation of visual detail is used consistently throughout *Undercoat* and imbues the artworks (and poems) with temporal and narrative depth, alluding to backstories and subsequent action continuing outside the frame/moment captured. We are repeatedly directed to 'look', invited to wonder – 'But what's that in the centre?' (p. 14) – or encouraged to pause and contemplate a just-discovered detail with 'hang on'. The effect is synesthetic, the eye "reading" the painting via the poem, but the approach is (thankfully) not prescriptive: as our guide, O'Flynn searches for and points us toward stories within the action of the paintings, but does not eradicate their mystery – he leaves lacunas of ambiguity, employing questions to draw us, as active participants, into the viewing process, while carefully holding space for our own interpretation:

... A milk jug. Four oranges,
or are they potatoes? ...
... Places of light and shade that might be walls.
And in the foreground a chair pushed back.
Someone has left the scene in a hurry, throwing
down the tea-towel. Be still! she might have said.
It was going to be a portrait of him (‘Kitchen Still Life’, p. 3)

As in an art gallery, where one might first search for clues in a painting's title before stepping back to survey for meaning in the visual whole, the reader of *Undercoat* might be tempted to first look up the paintings as a way of making inroads into the poems they are written after. In fact, one can do so at the publisher's website, which provides a [gallery](#) of images that inspired the poems. However, this reader, at least, quickly lost that desire: for the narrative of *Undercoat* is not just the story of the paintings but of the poet looking *at* the paintings, and of us looking at them through him. To limit this multifaceted experience by referencing the

paintings in the first instance feels like a diminution, although no doubt it might subsequently open up more facets of 'poem as painting'.

The further one reads, however, the more it becomes clear that what these poems are really about is perspective. Take, for example, 'Bridle Track', where everything is 'documented from a one point / perspective, a ravenous bird's eye point of view' (p. 11). In this poem, the clouds seen from above are 'heavier than light' and the sky becomes 'a paradox because if the bridle slips' and the rider and his horse 'were to stumble/... there is nothing to stop her/ or him from falling up and bursting into the air' (p. 11). The absurd image of the horse and rider 'falling up' perfectly suggests the disorientating bird's-eye perspective of the painting and prepares the reader for the more complex interrogation of perspectives to come. The poem 'Sofola 1965' also foreshadows this in its reference to the painted landscape as 'map without scale' and 'scale without map' (p. 8), suggesting we are entering territory where there is no set perspective and objects only gain meaning in relationship to each other.

This sense of relational uncertainty is emphasised by the first poem in Part Two, Poems on Canvas, titled 'Lostness'. Here, the poet's exploration of perspective is broadened to encompass the positionality of the poet as a viewer not necessarily outside of, but within, the poem as painting. In 'Lostness', the poet no longer simply observes but enters the world of the painting, overtly challenging a one-point perspective, suggesting:

The trouble with landscape painting
is you cannot tell which way is south.
If I was a migratory tern staring
beyond the frame, which way would I fly? (p. 16)

The poet now moves beyond merely pondering what happens within the pictorial moment and goes further, in effect breaking the forth wall of the frame as proscenium arch, by questioning:

Of all the thousand stories a picture
may tell, which one is impossibly true?
I glimpse myself in the mirror and ask
Who is that? Which way out? (p. 16)

Tellingly, this is the only poem in *Undercoat* which is not attributed to being written "after" a nominated painting. The frame in this poem is the mirror containing the speaker's reflection, but in the unreliable world of 'map without scale', how are poet and reader to know what they are truly seeing, what is really there and what is reflection/projection?

As the book progresses, layer after layer of the process of painting and looking are stripped away, exposing more uncertainty, more possibilities. In Part Two, the poet interrogates not just the art but the artist. 'You have to wonder what sort of opiates / they were on' he comments about an abstract image by surrealist painter Joan Miro (p. 27). Further on, he

addresses the characters in the paintings more directly: 'You hang on those salted beachside walls / fading in all seasons' weather' he says to the figure in 'Salted Head' (p. 23). The poet even enters *into* the pictures, trying on a character as his own: 'I am the one-eyed clown about to be blessed / from the cannon out of the frame' he tells us in 'The Tilled Field' (p. 21).

And not just the painter and their work is interrogated – in 'Arearea' (p. 26) the physical poster the image is reproduced on is situated and reframed within its temporal location, zoomed out on to reveal it as a picture within a setting that is itself a memory frozen in time:

Four years later that soiled reproduction
has not moved from the wall,
the sticky tape holding it up a little yellower
than the sad-eyed beautiful girls,
even sadder now at the loss of paradise... (p. 26)

The poems from this section of the book grasp at ghosts, at lives 'All gone now. Curtains blowing', at prints decaying on walls and in memory, at 'artists unknown' and at pictures referenced but absent and 'stolen' ('Still Life', p. 28). As in art, so in life, O'Flynn seems to be saying, certainties dissolve like the horizon in 'Rumour of Birds':

...Her green dress caught in
the breeze. Fingers counting, one, two, though what?
Behind her the horizon has dissolved but for a smudge
of headland. Perhaps they are questions: Who dared
build this road I am on? Which way does it lead? (p. 30)

The further into the book one gets, the less sure one is about what is real, what is imagined, what remains, and what was ever there. Again, relationship without direction leaves us falling, like the horse in 'Bridle Track', up into the air, questioning all perspectives. Perhaps, O'Flynn seems to be suggesting, we are all 'scale without map', existing in relation to each other but without a true north to orientate ourselves.

This sense is heightened in the last section, 'The Human Face', which presents the face as landscape, an unknown territory, a 'unique cosmos':

One tab of acid too many.
The heatmap of his face reveals
the cool perimeters like a topographic
chart of stormy weather ('Psychedelic Head', p. 40)

Like the other landscapes depicted in *Undercoat*, these faces-as-picture poems are not to be contained but threaten to erupt, with the 'embolism beneath the human façade / bursting out' (p. 40). The reader is kept disorientated, a kaleidoscope of potential perspectives making us question the veracity of what we "see", how much of it is coming from the artist, how much from the poet, and how much from us. In the final poem of the book, 'Portrait of David Wenham', O'Flynn muses:

Why the crimson lipstick? Unless that's
what's called *Acting*. About to cry it seems –
those sapphire irises – limpid pools?
windows of the soul? What other clichés lurk
in the Stanislavskian mask of the human face? (p. 41)

The poet observes that in the portrait, Wenham 'comes across all undercoat' and in this sense is 'like / us all', a 'blank canvas' primed for projection by the viewer/poet/reader who each brings their own perspective capable of altering not just what is seen but what is there. In this realm of multifaceted and shifting perspectives, the poet as conduit and creator invites the reader to meet the artist and their work inside the reimagined landscape of his poems, skillfully guiding them through a synesthetic "viewing" experience while leaving space for the reader's own interpretations and imaginary cocreations.

The poems in *Undercoat* burst their banks upon reading in the same way as the paintings they are in relationship with burst theirs frames upon being viewed. Both 'fall up' into the imagination, reverberating forward and backward into the unique minds of their audience. And while O'Flynn leaves us with the feeling that capturing the flux and complexity of life in either image or metaphor is a nebulous business, his deft skill in attempting to do so makes one thing clear – when poems and paintings meet, 'the bond between them is real' (p. 29).

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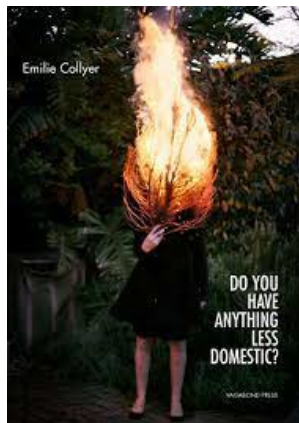
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TEXT review

Portrait of a poet on fire

review by Bronwyn Lovell



Emilie Collyer

Do You Have Anything Less Domestic?

Vagabond Press, NSW 2022

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Have you got anything less domestic? may be a debut, but Emilie Collyer is no debutante. She is an award-winning playwright of international renown. And although this is her first poetry collection, Collyer is a long established, much loved and highly regarded voice in the Melbourne poetry scene, and her poems have been widely anthologised. As Lisa Gorton observes in her endorsement, 'this is the work of years'. Indeed, those years are keenly felt – in the honed poetic craft as well as the weight of grief accrued by a woman navigating midlife, a woman who unwittingly finds herself 'the adult in this house' (p. 19) and wonders if life might have anything more alluring on offer.

Have you got anything less domestic? takes the reader on an autobiographical journey through a woman's life, a life that has strayed from stereotypical templates, that has scribbled outside those familiar lines that seek to confine women's lives to a certain shape and size. As the title suggests, Collyer finds the roles of women available to her ill-fitting. Collyer confesses she 'did not dream of wedding dresses, picket fences / or milky babies' (p. 19). That kind of domesticity was never part of her identity. She recalls how she did not clean or decorate her partner's rundown home when she moved in and says, 'I don't woman well' (p. 22).

The cover features a powerful image from photographic artist Daisy Noyes entitled *Burning Bush*. We cannot see the woman's face for the flames, but she holds a torch that defies the darkness that surrounds her. This striking image and its title conjure the Bible story about the bush that was on fire but didn't burn, that didn't disintegrate, that did not cease to exist. Likewise, this book tells the story of a woman who endures, who remains intact despite attacks, who withstands the fires of patriarchal persecution. In a society that too often fails to recognise the value of women beyond their roles as homemakers and mothers, Collyer's voice asserts women's inherent and inexorable worth. As a woman who did not bear children, Collyer declares, 'I did not crack open / my world did not fall apart' (p. 28).

The collection is divided into five parts, and their titles are brilliant:

- Do you have anything less domestic?
- Don't write about your family, nobody cares
- It's important to keep up weight-bearing exercise
- You have a nice smile, you should use it more
- I hope I won't put anyone off by saying this is genuinely feminist

In this way, Collyer's collection is a slow burn. It starts with a few sparks, the occasional hiss or spit, before roaring into a crescendo as it reaches its climax and announces itself as the incendiary feminist creation it is.

Collyer's collection not only illuminates the suffering and terror that society inflicts on women, but also its criminal neglect of animals and children. A poem called 'Bird song' (p. 92–94) considers the inconceivable cruelty of incarcerating children in adult prisons. Given its haunting title, readers are invited to associate the caged children in this poem with the winged creatures Collyer has previously mentioned – the ill-fated fledgling whose 'warm pulse' is 'put down' (p. 54–56) and the startling linguistic revelation that '*snarje* is the word / for what is left of birds / when they fly into propellers' (p. 15).

In *Have you got anything less domestic?*, Collyer bears witness to acts of 'ordinary daylight bravery' (p. 83) amid inhumane machinations. She unmask mythic personalities struggling to thrive in suburbia: Cassandra, Penelope, Elektra. Collyer asserts, 'Antigone is in every kitchen' (p. 83). This collection shines a light on the everyday heroine who is secretly fighting

for breath in a stifling domestic space, ‘surviving her own unhappiness’ (p. 83) – a woman many female readers are bound to intimately recognise.

Bronwyn Lovell is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of South Australia. Her debut poetry collection In Bed With Animals was published by Recent Work Press in 2022 and her verse novel Between Worlds is forthcoming from University of Western Australia Publishing.