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Reviews contents

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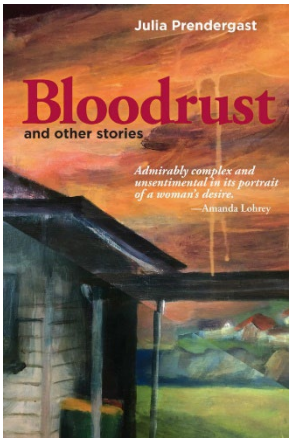
TEXT review

Telling it true

review by Jen Webb



Julia Prendergast
Bloodrust and other stories
Spineless Wonders, Strawberry Hills NSW, 2022
ISBN 9781925052909
Pb 166pp AUD24.99

Something happens to my mind when I read language that has been pushed beyond the conventions, whether those conventions frame scholarly writing, creative expression or demotic speech. The surprise trips some sort of wire, my perception of the world flickers through a buffering process, and then the world reappears, crisp and clear but different.

This is not just a product of my imagination. Linguists and philosophers have long assured us that language can craft a *something* we can experience, in ways we hadn't yet considered. That it can attend to the gap between experience and reality, between absence and presence, between the particular and the universal. [1]

I have been experiencing such effects while reading this intense, poetic, disturbing, captivating sequence of stories. The narrative voice/s make me think immediately of the voice in Adrienne Rich's famous poem, 'Diving into the wreck' [2]: one that is lyrical, observant, thoughtful, and above all, fiercely determined, or determinedly fierce. Prendergast's narrative voice seems to grow out of the same ethical soil as Rich's: a clear-eyed understanding that things are not as they should or could be; that there is something in our society that must be addressed.

Mostly, that *something* is family life: its internal politics; its complexities. *Bloodrust*'s stories are brilliantly direct about what it's like to be the mother in a 21st-century family, a period when women live lives that extend well beyond the family home, and yet are still bound by the social expectations that we owe service to husband and children.

Several of Prendergast's narrators find themselves in this position, shaken rather than stirred by the frustration of constantly having to sort out other people's crap, even when those other people are those she loves, gave birth to, raised, adores; even while fantasising about choking them. Complex emotional tensions come out punching in the very first story, 'Contrapuntal', when the narrator's mostly adult children are home for her birthday. She would love them to be elsewhere: 'If today were about her she'd be in the bath with a book. Instead, all this food…'; and when the younger son niggles:

> *I'm not up for this today*, says the mother, deadpan. She wants to take the wheel of brie and stuff it down his thick throat, in one piece, watch him turn red and gag and NOT BE ABLE TO SPEAK FOR A WHILE. (p. 13)

This is the product of what the narrator, deadpan, a couple of pages later, describes as 'The fuckwittery of mothering – growing actual people in your own body' (p. 15) – actual people who can never get enough of you, and ensure that you can never get enough of them. An experience and a perspective that is funny; and frightening; and true. For some of us at least. For me, certainly.

There's a thread of violence in the book, but mostly the violence is imagined, a release valve from the all-too-much-ness of life, from the pressures of being what we of course always are – divided selves, trying to navigate the competing imperatives of our individual parts. Sometimes, though, material violence is both necessary and ethical. For example, in the story 'Rhodes' – a story so short and musical that really it's a prose poem – the narrator sees a desperately hurt and dying cat, its 'guts like maggoty brain matter' (p. 83). The cat may be read as a metaphor for the narrator's own relationship ('Why do we fester in each other?' she asks), but it is also a real creature, suffering. So: 'I loosen a boulder, carry it closer. *It's okay darlingheart*, I say. Strobe-lit, I drop the rock on the cat's head' (p. 83). This is a violence that is ethical, loving, kind; the harm that had afflicted the cat permitted no other solution to its agony.

As well as stories that illuminate the violence, the fragility, and the danger that are always present in the everyday, this collection illuminates deep tenderness, and resilience. For me, the

piece that best exemplifies this is ‘Today is tomorrow’, a COVID story written in what we still, wide-eyed, call ‘the most locked-down city in the world’. Here, the narrator is drifting through a lockdown period of ‘Dissolving time. Future past. Past future’ (p. 77). Her days and nights involve trying to work; participating in all those ‘virtual gatherings’ that characterised the pandemic for pretty well all of us, who had to become instant experts in Teams and Zoom and FaceTime; trying to write in a time and a place that is ‘without associations and, at the same time, over-laden’ (p. 80). Her kids are at home, avoiding the impacts of the virus, and her hallways are cluttered with their possessions and with the sounds of their breathing. ‘I know how lucky I am to have breathing people in my house, a whole collection of breathing people’, says the narrator (p. 79), but nonetheless feels as though she herself is becoming the ghost among them, unable to sleep, never properly awake. Always connected to both IRL and online people, 24/7, she finds herself drifting away due to ‘connectivity issues’ (p. 81), as she types on the screen during a meeting, switching off her camera, commenting to herself: ‘I think it’s the truest thing I’ve written’ (p. 81).

Each story in this collection feels like the truest thing written. And though I said ‘story’, what I should have said is ‘piece of writing’, because the works in this collection transcend the conventions of genre. Reading them plunged me back into my undergraduate days, way back in the 1990s, when we seemed to be in a constant tizz about genre theory. One line of thought then held that genre is a system of walled cities and gated communities where works defined as belonging to a specific category are carefully lodged together: a ‘law’ of genre that initiated a sort of literary apartheid where no cross-category mixing is permitted [3]. Another, more open, line of thought held that a genre is characterised by a set of family resemblances [4], with ties no more authoritarian than those between siblings.

We worried at genre, shaking it to and fro, trying to make sense of where and how it might make sense, but took comfort from Derrida’s ‘Law of genre’. This essay opens with –

> Genres are not to be mixed.
> I will not mix genres.
> I repeat: Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them. (Derrida, 1980, p. 55)

– yet, he says, we both can and do mix them, because despite the injunctions to textual purity, texts *participate* in, rather than *belong* to, specific genres (1980, p. 65).

Bloodrust is an exemplar of such participation. Some stories seem to fit neatly into the genre of the short story: for example, ‘Everything that matters is silvery white’, where the heartbreak and the luminosity of adolescent love thread thoughtfully across each page. Other pieces behave like lineated poems: for example, ‘Riddled gestures’, which seems to weave love and kickboxing, and uses the white space of the page to provide room for breath. Others again behave like prose poems: for example, ‘Freefalling’, a sort of meditation on loss. But whatever form the pieces take, and whatever characters occupy each piece, the through-voice of the collection does something Julia tells me she was inspired by Bruce Pascoe to do: *Tell it true*.

Notes

[1] See, e.g., Derrida, J. (1974). *Of Grammatology* (trans Gayatri Spivak). Johns Hopkins University Press.

[2] Rich, A. (1973). *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972*. Norton.

[3] Derrida, J. (1980). The law of genre (trans Avital Ronell). *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 55–81.

[4] Wittgenstein used games as an analogy to argue that all linguistic activities that share characteristics are part of the same domain: 'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblance"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament. etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family' (1978, p. 32). For several decades, this language/games analogy was deployed to theorise the structure and rules of genre, though it is less readily asserted now. See Wittgenstein, L. (1978). *Philosophical investigations* (trans G.E.M. Anscombe). Oxford University Press.

Jen Webb is Professor of Creative Practice and Dean of Graduate Research at the University of Canberra. Her research and practice address creativity, the ethics of representation, and material poetics. Recent publications include Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts *(Manchester UP, 2016),* Gender and the Creative Labour Market *(Palgrave, 2022); and poetry volumes* Watching the World *(with Paul Hetherington; Blemish Books, 2015),* Moving Targets *(Recent Work Press, 2018), and* Flight Mode *(with Shé Hawke, 2020). She is co-editor of the literary journal Meniscus and the scholarly journal* Axon: Creative Explorations.

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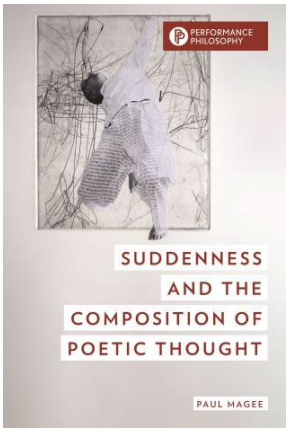
TEXT review

Who talks like this?

review by Kevin Brophy



Paul Magee
Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought
Rowman & Littlefield, London UK 2022
ISBN 9781538153529
Hbk 243pp AUD172.00

Not long ago I saw a sticker on the back window of a car suggesting, *HONK IF YOU'RE SLAY*. It was a small sedan driven by a young woman. Over the next week I tried to make sense of this fragment of language through consulting the internet, an urban dictionary, and all sorts of friends. Nowhere could I find a meaning that would make this sticker-slogan make reasonable sense. Presumably, the statement is phrased this way because there is something new to be said and it can't be said quite as fully in any other way. Its meaning is still a mystery to me, though I know that many readers might shake their head at me not knowing what it means. Language runs ahead of us, skips around us, keeps to niches, spreads wildly, provokes, riffs, and offers itself as the plaything of the linguistically-minded mind. A couple of days ago I was drawn into wondering just what connotations the word 'confusion' might have had for Tennyson when he asked, 'Is there confusion in the little isle?' towards the end of his Choric Song attached to

'The Lotos-Eaters'. In 1833, was it a psychological word; was it pointing to a society-wide state; did it mean disarray more than it might have meant a mental fog? I am not sure how it might have been understood in its nearest sense by a contemporary reader because words are so much at the mercy of the sometimes-passing games we play and fashions we try with each other and with meaning.

Paul Magee's new book, *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought*, published as part of a 'Performance Philosophy' series by Rowman & Littlefield, comes at these surprises, the originalities, the spurts and flows of language as it's made in our mouths, by asking questions that already intrigue and tease many of us: Can we know what we are going to say before we say it? Does thinking happen through speaking? Do we only know what we think by opening our mouths and beginning to speak? And if we do think by speaking, is poetry a kind of thinking-by-writing? In other words, is poetry an event happening in front of us – an emerging thought or epiphany-upon-speaking, or is a poem so composed, revised, prepared and pre-digested by accretion and artifice that it must obscure any of this experience?

Magee's book is hands-on, it is challenging and provoking, it's both incomplete and exhaustively detailed. And it is a model of contemporary research in the field of Creative Writing – taking what it needs from linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, ethnography, anthropology, close textual analysis, historical scholarship and lived experience. It sits alongside Nigel Krauth's *The Creative Writer's Mind* (Neurolinguistic Matters, 2022) as a recent *tour de force* in the field. This mix of interdisciplinary ingredients could produce a mish-mash, but in Magee's hands, under the guidance of his developing argument and a growing hunch about writing poetry, the book holds together both as a thesis and as its own narrative of inquiry. You get the sense that Magee has read a lot more in each field that he ventures into than he can possibly mention.

His starting point is the eccentric essay by Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Gradual Production of Thoughts whilst Speaking', published in 1806 – an essay that has occasionally caught the notice of writers, critics, neuroscientists and philosophers. Kleist was interested in the curious matter of the way we manage to speak without knowing exactly what we will say before we say it. It seems we often have to find out, in a conversation, what we think by speaking. We lack the cognitive ability to know in advance what we will say, though when we speak we do seem to be speaking our already composed thoughts. Magee calls this emergent experience 'suddenness'. It occurs across two or three seconds of time, over and over again. Magee is interested in how and whether this might tell us something about the writing of poems. Could composing poems be similar to the experience of speaking that Kleist describes? In particular, is the arrangement of poems in lines a clue to the way the mind and mouth typically produce 'spurts' of speech?

His book pushes back against the dominant, dispiriting and powerful idea, or perhaps zeitgeist, present in much critical theory and Postmodern philosophy and Post-structural thinking over the past seventy years, namely the view that originality (in any slightly Romantic sense) is not possible – that text replays text, that all text quotes, borrows, paraphrases, copies and

plagiarises past texts, that there is no distinction to be made between speaking and writing, and that the author is not an individual but a function of text. However, rather than digging-in to criticise these views in detail, Magee has chosen to follow his own path of inquiry, aiming to open the reader to new ideas and angles on how originality, epiphany, and creativity with regard to the written word might be understood, discussed and appreciated. And it's quite a ride.

The early chapters work off a series of interviews Magee has conducted with poets over a decade and more. He calls this an ethnographic approach, one which acknowledges we need to hear from the poets if we are interested in what it's like to write a poem. Seventy-five of these interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015 as part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Project led by Professor Jen Webb of the University of Canberra. Paul Magee and I were the other two chief investigators. We interviewed poets from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. A number of interviews that I conducted for this project are quoted throughout this first part of the book. Poets such as Don Paterson, C. D. Wright, Medbh McGuckian, C. K. Williams and Kenneth Goldsmith receive the most attention. The discussion of these interviews hinges on poets' responses to a statement from Auden: 'When we genuinely speak we do not have the words ready to do our bidding, we have to find them. And we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before' (p. 15).

I have an inkling that Auden did not quite know what he was going to say (or write) when he began composing that promising couple of sentences, and that toward the end, that final 'and we say' – in reaching for the next thought – gathered to his words a rhetorical flow and gravitas he couldn't resist, which resulted in a claim he might have preferred to qualify (to death) if it had not come so elegantly and powerfully to him. In any case, the statement draws many different responses from the poets we interviewed. If you are interested in more such interviews, the ARC project resulted in a locally-focused book that Magee doesn't reference: *Everyday Words & Creative Practice: Ten Australian Poets in Conversation* published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2019.

In the central section of Magee's book, he takes up historical scholarship to argue for an almost literal equation between composition and speaking. Do we have evidence of poems being composed at the speed of a conversational, speaking voice – that is, naturally, as naturally as leaves come to a tree? Perhaps it is possible that Keats did write 'Ode to a Nightingale' in a few hours, and perhaps it is true that his manuscripts have very few corrections. However, Magee notes his friend and confidant, Richard Woodhouse, reported: 'Keats has repeatedly said in conversation that he never sits down to write unless he is full of ideas' (p. 50). Exactly what this means is unclear. I know from experience that I can write a whole poem, or most of it, in my head across the span of a day, and then in a few minutes have it down on paper once the opportunity comes. I expect Keats was composing sequences of words in his mind as much as he might have been packing it with ideas before he wrote. There are no clear boundary lines between writing, thinking and speaking. Shelley, in contrast to Keats, produced his poems, he claimed, by 'labour and study' (p. 58). And, we might add, by waiting. Heidegger noted, 'We never come to thoughts. They come to us' (p. 62). Medbh McGuckian says in response to a

question on spontaneity in composition, 'I am slogging on with dead matter in the hope the worm may turn with the spade' (p. 57).

These discussions of the speed and spontaneity of composition among Romantic poets and others brings Magee to scholarship surrounding orality in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. How is it that these poems contain idioms and references from mixed times and mixed dialects – across too much time for Homer alone to be the author. He recounts the sometimes-controversial anthropological work of Milman Perry and Albert Lord who identified a large number of formulaic expressions across these works (often obscured by translators attempting to make the work more literary and more poetic), which were taken as evidence of the kinds of linking phrases common to anyone who is trying to formulate their next statement. For Parry, the likelihood was that these poems were repeatedly composed anew, in real-time before an audience, largely by means of these linguistic building blocks. In 1928, with recording devices, epic poetry from the Balkans oral tradition were laid down and transcribed, offering some evidence that in fact this method of creating-anew in front of an audience might have been how such a tradition achieved incredible feats of 'memory'. Important to this is the fact that epic composition was always 'created live at something like the pace at which we speak' (p. 79).

In connection with this, Magee reports that these contemporary epic poets of the Balkans have no clear idea of what a word is. Not being literate, they do not need to know. When questioned about single words, they come up with phrases. For them, the nearest idea to what we know as a word in a text would be a unit of utterance. Their notion of 'reproducing' an exact copy of a narrative verse might mean adding many more verses to its structure comprehended as a whole at one hearing. For them, Magee notes, this would be an identical copy. What this alerts us to is the relative narrowness of our ideas about authorship, originality and ownership under the rule of literacy.

This moves us on to the kind of thinking that informs an oral tradition, and how different that might be to a modern, literate tradition. Magee points to research that highlights the possibility that bursts of loosely connected syntax in Homer's verse might reflect the way a speaker characteristically produces language – in brief phrases rather than in properly constructed sentences. We've known this since the invention of recording devices. I know this too, as Paul does, from transcribing many dozens of interviews. As Magee notes, it is not possible to simply type out the words people say. Transcription requires transforming spurts of spoken speech (punctuated sensibly by tone, pause, gesture, facial expression and voice modulation) into comprehensible grammatical sentences. Transcribers cannot let the speech stand on the page as it did when spoken for, as Magee points out, we have 'a prejudice towards a sentence-based syntax' (p. 125).

In the final section, Magee comes more squarely at the question that animates his book: if some poetry does seem to arise (or happen) much as speech does in conversation, that is, in the process of thoughts arriving at articulations that themselves clarify and form the thought, how is it that poetry looks and sounds nothing like the transcripts of a conversation? From the analytic field work of linguists Michael Halliday, Christian Matthiessen, Eleanor Barry and

Wallace Chafe, Magee mounts a case that lineation in fact offers a speech-like experience for the reader (and for the composing poet) such that the poet and reader can enter into a process whereby the words produce the thoughts just as much as they might more conventionally express a thought. Lineation is a rhythmic thing, linked to breathing, and to the turn-taking of discourse, to echoes and rhyming from the lines close to it. In fact, when rawly spoken transcripts are broken into lines, as if produced poetically, they can make a lot more immediate sense.

And yet, nevertheless, it remains the case that in conversation a sense of linguistic impoverishment hovers. This might be an illusion as Halliday and, even earlier, Lev Vygotsky have pointed out. The possible epic novels of communication that can happen unspoken or via the briefest utterances for an intimate couple attest to this impoverishment being an illusion.

Magee proposes that poetry is not the opposite of speaking, but rather might ideally be a slowed-down, expanded, highly verbalised, performatively inflected version of speech. The slowing-down is important to poetry when English is usually spoken at about 180 words per minute while some readers can consume prose at up to 400 words per minute. In addition, the freedom poetry assumes to place words in relation to each other upon the white space of the page, and offer these words as caesurae, lines and stanzas, is a further set of notations or punctuations that simulate more vividly than prose the timing, the gestural nature, the emergent and even epiphanic quality of spoken word.

A final discussion of originality against examples of formulaic and merely novel speech offers pathways to thinking that might justify another book from Magee. There is material here for every poet under the spell (and pressure) of creating images and metaphors. Of poets, Magee asks, ‘Who talks like this? And yet something feels profoundly spoken about…’ (p. 213). And if it is poets who talk like this, couldn’t we say equally that it is language itself that presses the new and original upon us? Indeed, honk if you’re slay.

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Emeritus Professor Kevin Brophy, AM has published widely on creativity and creative arts education. He is a recent winner of the Michel Wright Prize for poetry, and was poet in residence at the Keesing Studio in Paris 2019-20. His latest book is the short story collection, The Lion in Love*, Finlay Lloyd (2022)* https://finlaylloyd.com/#lion

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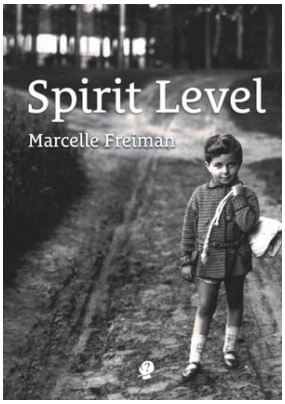
TEXT review

‘There is a stillness I seek’: On ekphrasis and memory

review by Dominic Symes



Marcelle Freiman
Spirit Level
Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah, NSW, 2022
ISBN 9781922571144
Pb 100 AUD25.00

Marcelle Freiman’s *Spirit Level* is a delicate balancing act, where positive tensions between the seen and the remembered are painted with expert brushstrokes, advancing the contemporary ekphrastic project from a different perspective; a productive, yet blurred, binary: the poet-academic.

Ekphrastic poetry cannot be categorised as a genre, like love poetry (though ekphrastic poems can be romantic); nor can it be classed as a form, like a haiku or villanelle (though it can be written in such forms); nor defined as poetry from a particular period in time, like the Romantic period (though it has been around in some form since Ancient Greece). It may appear as an odd tactic to begin describing a creative work by what it isn’t, but as a result of this failure of

categorisation, scholarship often falls short of explaining and demonstrating what effective ekphrasis is.

In *Node 5: Ekphrasis and the question of perfect equilibrium*, Gregory Pardlo takes the reader into the poet's 'workshop', borrowing a 'Cartesian system to plot dimensions of the relationship between poet and object' in an ekphrastic poem, to create the following figure:

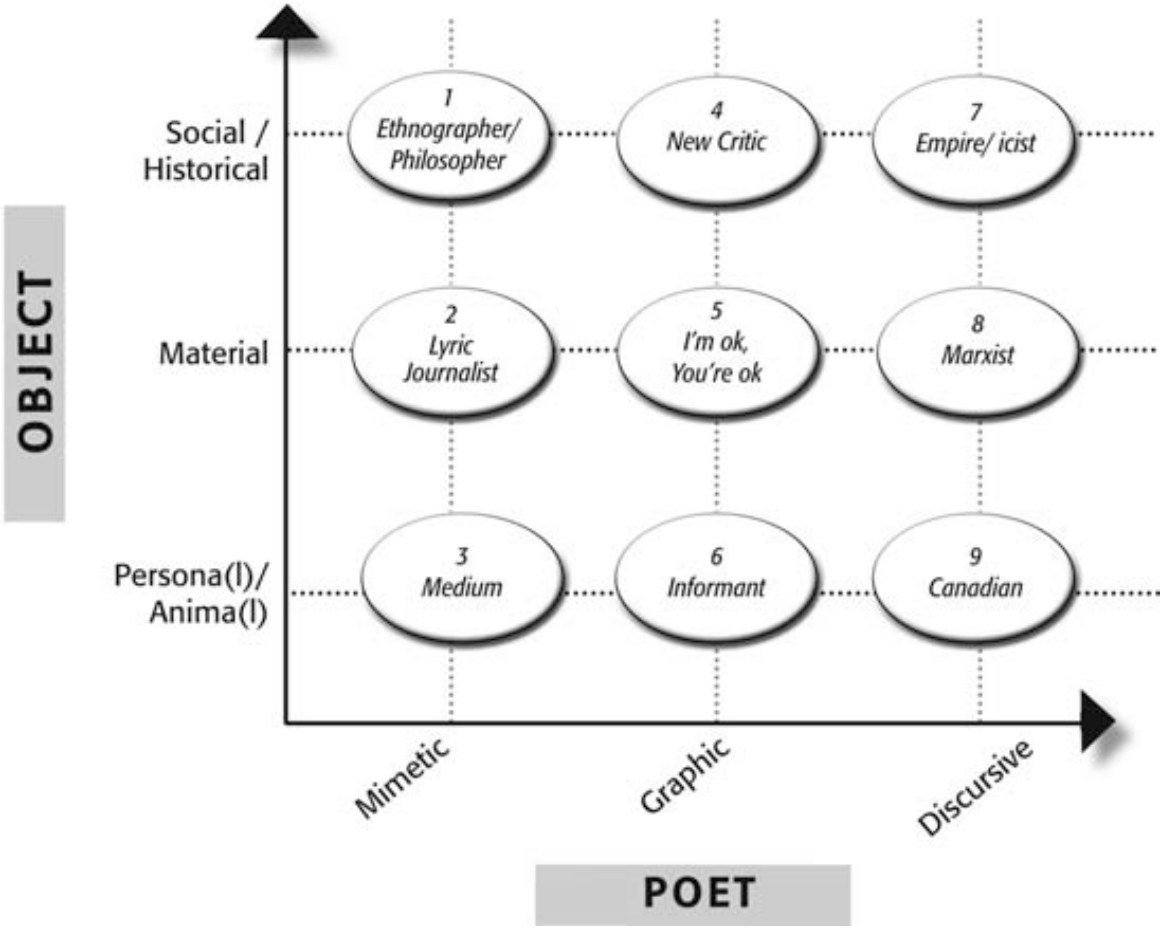


Figure 1: Pardlo's plot of ekphrastic nodes (2012, p. 601)

Node 5 (Graphic–Material) is the point where all elements and subject positions make the most conventionally 'balanced poem in which we witness the poet dancing with the object and/or the artist' (Pardlo, p. 601). Pardlo describes this tenuous balance as an 'aesthetic stalemate', where forces in opposition have the effect of cancelling each other (p. 601). Because a poem will always fail to obtain its ideal, as Ben Lerner writes in *The Hatred of Poetry*, as readers, we prefer poetry which 'allows us to measure the gap between the actual and the virtual' (2016, p. 9).

Freiman's *Spirit Level* does this by demonstrating how ekphrastically-informed subject positions can apply not only to visual art, but to memory. The acknowledged 'failure to comprehensively account for the artwork' is extended into a contemplation of visual cues which narrate the loss inherent in revisiting memories (Symes 2018). Freiman in her poetry,

like Pardlo in his essay, is interested in seeing what the ekphrastic poem can do beyond just describing a visual object for the sake of an exhibition or a commission.

Characteristic of *Spirit Level* is the 'flat bubble' Freiman describes in 'The Dam', where memory is sealed and maintained (p. 23). Like an artwork hanging in an exhibition, there is a barrier between the poet and their subject which they cannot pierce. This bubble, far from being limiting, is productive for the poet, as the collection's opening line confirms: 'there is a stillness I require' (p. 11). Murray Kreiger's early and influential study of ekphrasis titled *Ekphrasis and the still movement of poetry; or, Laokoon revisited*, demarcated the non-temporality of physical art-objects (1967). For Kreiger, even if the figures in an existing art-object have a narrative function, that narrative is frozen in the moment of its creation. In 'Shadow Play' Freiman describes:

> On the wall above the wardrobe in our room,
> the frieze my mother sewed on linen:
> appliquéd sheep, a farmer's wife,
> embroidered stitches on her apron (p.26)

The object, frozen in time, is intimately tied to the speaker's mother's creative labour and the memory of that labour. The scene depicted on the frieze, by not existing in narrative time, has the effect of existing in this 'flat bubble' of memory. It represents the pastoral memories of the speaker's youth in South Africa, but also, on the level of material production, it evokes the toil of life on the land and its gendered inflections, where her mother spent 'months sewing that frieze', sewing herself (the 'farmer's wife') into the scene (p. 26).

This *mis-en-abyme* is an ekphrastic principle which Freiman is adept at exploiting in other ways, through Proustian or Pamuk-like visual conduits: objects or images which exist in (and in advance of) the poem to spark memory. To read *Spirit Level* is to sit with the poet as they flick through a box of old photographs (like those of August Sander in 'The Names', p. 64), postcards or replicas of artworks they've accumulated over their life from visiting galleries and exhibitions (like The Art Gallery of NSW in 'Feathered', p. 61).

The arrangement of poems in the book and their different visual foci creates a *wunderkammer* effect, like Kemal's souvenirs of Füsun arranged in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*. To google the paintings listed in the notes and acknowledgements on the back page of *Spirit Level* is to find a unique collection of artworks, both Australian and European, which have no link other than Freiman's eye. As Pardlo writes, 'we mistake the subject of ekphrasis to be the [art-object] itself rather than, more rightly, the poet's *encounter* with that object' (italics in original, p. 588). *Spirit Level*, like Pamuk's museum, has the supplementary effect of curating an exhibition of artworks and poems. By paying attention to objects and writing about the memories and experiences they evoke, Frieman brings us deeper into her experience and creates something real in the world.

The ‘flame bright’ flowers in ‘Poinsettias’ which respond directly (in a traditionally ekphrastic sense) to those in Grace Cossington Smith’s 1931 painting of the same name (p. 28), are echoed a few pages later in the ‘scarlet bougainvillea’ of ‘Seven Ways of Mourning’ (p. 31). ‘Seven Ways of Mourning’ does not respond directly to an art-object, but instead to a visually anchored memory. It is easy to see how the art-object and the visual memory can be substituted through Freiman’s ekphrastic approach, which is grounded in sight and purposes the senses to burst through the ‘flat bubble’ which keeps the poet distant from their subject. As Freiman continues, in the opening poem ‘Still’: ‘the stillness I seek / is not darkness’ (p. 11).

This eye for colour in the visual conduits which conjure memory are a distinctive ‘painterly’ feature of Freiman’s work. As WJT Mitchell’s famous definition of ekphrasis contends, the poem is a ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’ (1994, p. 152); or to phrase more elementarily, a creative response to a created object. To return to the technical concerns of Pardlo’s essay (asking how and why questions of the ekphrastic poem) in the same way a poet can observe a painting and not write a poem about it, an adult can have a childhood memory evoked and not write a poem about it, but in Freiman, the poet’s *experience* of memory is performed through the creative act. The red from the poinsettias and bougainvillea reappear in ‘mama’s red lipstick’, (‘Clown’, p. 37) and in the ‘red happiness candles’ the speaker of ‘Chinese Box in Hong Kong’ buys, along with ‘antique box of leather, also red’ (p. 48). The two blue poems after Tony Tuckson’s ‘White lines (vertical) on ultramarine’ and the final poem in the collection ‘Yellow’, reaffirms Freiman’s capacity to harness positive tension between the inherent binaries in ekphrastic writing: to stand in front of a painting as a poet, not a painter, but to write in a painterly way emphasising colour.

While Pardlo describes his Node 5 as a non-space, the beauty of this collection is how Freiman’s *Spirit Level* shifts and moves through the binaries of poem-painting, poet-academic, actual-virtual, to create poetry that radically repurposes ekphrasis to write about memory.

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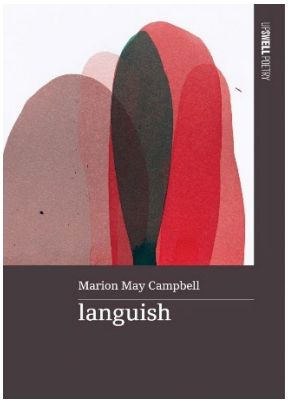
TEXT review

‘forging a language out of silence’

review by Julia Fazzari



Marion May Campbell
languish
Upswell, Western Australia, 2022
ISBN 9780645248074
Pb 103pp AUD24.99

In an endorsement found in the frontmatter of *languish*, Australian poet and novelist Tracey Ryan states: ‘Marion May Campbell’s poems do not languish – they do *language*. Language where it crackles and contradicts, refuses to be standard – or teeters on the edge of paradox, like the gift that is poison in another tongue’. It is clear from the first poem that Campbell, indeed, does do language, as she consistently pushes the boundaries of poetic conventions, as her work is not bound by poetic forms and bends words in unpredictable ways, such as ‘the French lang-uage she e-nun-ci-ates’ (p. 23, from the poem ‘Spanish cow’). Campbell possesses the ability to wholly captivate me as a reader. The poems are personal, vulnerable and raw, seen in lines such as: ‘there was the inky blue black lettering below the pink pulsing breasts […] the raw old cunt that still was hers. Salt in the wounds’ (p. 58, from the poem ‘still life’); and yet, due to Campbell’s command over language, the reader is not left feeling unwelcome

in witnessing these intimacies. Readers are invited in and able to see themselves in the speaker's place. In her childhood, Campbell wanted to be a painter, and while her life took her in a different direction her poetry undeniably calls back to her youthful desires. Her poems are rich with imagery and there are especially no doubts of her artistry when the opening poem, 'speechless' (pp. 13-14), contains a promise and delivers in a pair of lines: 'but more now
the lightning / strike that'll turn any noun electric' (p. 13).

Campbell is the 'lightning strike' and each poem in this collection is 'electric'. Her words linger like temporary flash blindness long after they are read, with lines such as 'honey-soaked diabetics all of us' (p. 21) in the poem titled 'inheritance' (pp. 20-21); 'the overmen denounced our black wombiness' and 'the black bog of speechlessness' in 'Eurydice & the frogs' (p. 22); and 'all men are merely meat' (p. 40) in 'anything, or the measure of meat' (pp. 39-43).

More to Campbell's mastery over language, her latest poetry collection implicitly impels the reader to question the world around them, specifically the structures of power that historically and presently oppress women, and how the reader might relate to such a subject. *languish* provides insight into the effects these structures of contemporary society have had on not only Campbell herself but also on women throughout history, such as twentieth-century writers Violette Leduc and Janet Frame. The poems in this collection challenge these oppressive structures and ask readers to aid in dismantling the source of women's oppression.

In an interview with poet Emile Collyer, Campbell said: 'I think it is part of the motor, which drives me to write […] a long burning fury against all sorts of oppression that women suffer, silencing and disempowerment' (p. 5). Campbell's ethos is palpable – there is a motif concerning voice and sound that is carried throughout her latest collection. The opening poem, 'speechless', testifies to this drive, as a powerful siren song. There is a yearning within the stanzas to speak out against patriarchal structures in our contemporary society and demands the reader's attention. It can be understood that Campbell is writing against the structures that have held women's voices captive for millennia, as she is 'forging a language out of silence' (p. 93, from the poem 'cleaving, or rereading *rewriting difference & other distractions during this time of plague*', pp. 91-97).

In the same article in which the interview takes place, Collyer declares 'the feminist emphasis on deconstructing singular narratives, embracing multiplicity and fragmentation' (p. 3), and this 'feminist emphasis' is evident within Campbell's oeuvre. *languish* is no exception. There is a persistent rewriting of what is known, also a rewriting of self as hinted at in 'sleep of the old she-wolf' (pp. 60-65), to break away from structures of power that oppress women. Specifically, within the poem 'a triumph of democracy' (pp. 25-31), written after the Women 4 Justice Protest and the Cyclone Seroja in Kalbarri of April 2021, Campbell marries her ability to deconstruct and reconstruct language while expressing her 'burning fury'.

Campbell's poetry can be described as poetry of the 'now', as it reflects on current affairs and effortlessly encapsulates the experiences of women's oppression in our contemporary society. Yet, Campbell likewise possesses the ability to reach back into history and pull their voices

forward. She gathers the echoes of twentieth century writers and artists, like the ones mentioned above, and threads from ancient mythology and their figures, such as Eurydice, Medusa, and Teresias, and foregrounds them in her poetry. *languish* is rich with intertextuality, adding layers which enhance already distinguishable work. It is evident that lifetimes, not only her own, are combined and poured into her poetry.

It can certainly be said that Campbell's words are expansive and timeless. *languish* is a testament to Campbell's sprawling knowledge and expertise in this considerably curated collection.

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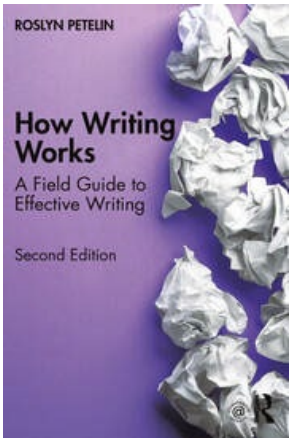
TEXT review

Despite the chatbots, writing still works

review by Rosemary Williamson



Roslyn Petelin
How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing, 2nd edition
Routledge, New York, 2022
ISBN 9781032016283
Pb 311pp AUD39.99

The second edition of Roslyn Petelin's *How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing* correctly describes itself as:

> an engaging and broad-ranging introduction to the elements of grammar, sentence structure, and style that will help you to write well across a range of academic, creative, and professional contexts, deftly combining practical strategies with scholarly principles. (p. iii)

In other words, it is 'an essential handbook for working writers and writing workers' (p. iii).

These phrases – working writers, writing workers – have long helped my students, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels, to conceptualise their writing selves and aspirations. In class, we have talked about career writers and those whose careers involve writing, and the potential to move between the two. I have recommended the first edition of *How Writing Works* as a resource to support and inspire writers of all guises and will do the same for the second edition.

Teachers of writing who have come to rely on *How Writing Works* will be pleased that much of the tried and trusted content of the first edition carries over to the second. Like its predecessor, the second edition contains eleven chapters. Readers begin with clear explications of writing (Chapter 1) and reading (Chapter 2) before moving to chapters on more technical matters such as word usage (Chapter 3), sentences, grammar and paragraphs (chapters 4 and 5) and punctuation (Chapter 6). Chapters 7 and 8 cover structure and design, and genres and workplace documents respectively; Chapter 9 covers academic research and writing. Chapter 10 introduces digital writing and has sections on the 'insistent and indelible email' and workplace-related social media and websites, as well as blogs, Twitter and texting. Finally, Chapter 11 addresses revision, editing and proofreading. The frequent inclusion of illuminating facts, examples, quotations and anecdotes enlivens content throughout. Each chapter has activities to complete, with answers supplied for some. Chapters 1 to 7 conclude with lists of further reading, which is a change from the first edition where the lists were placed together later in the book.

Other adjustments as well as updates have been made for the second edition. Some content within chapters has been re-ordered or revised; some examples have been refreshed. New quotations in chapters on grammar and on proofreading will no doubt be welcomed by those readers challenged by what can be seen as 'drier' content. Petelin has also simplified some terminology: 'form-class words' are now 'content words'; 'structure-class words' are now 'structure words'. Up-to-date references bring *How Writing Works* into the current decade; for example, the first page draws attention to the ubiquity of writing in daily life by quoting a 2020 estimate of 3.5 billion social media users. Examples of the effect of COVID-19 on language (p. 51) and on online writing (p. 238) remind readers of the social context in which language and writing evolve. All such changes represent refinement of the first edition rather than radical changes to it, which attests to the durability of *How Writing Works*. They also attest to Petelin's ongoing commitment to supporting an up-to-date community of practice.

Staying up-to-date extends to the second edition of *How Writing Works* acquiring an open-access companion website. This is the most notable change, although the book can stand alone, with its 311 pages providing as comprehensive an explication of writing as did its predecessor's 325 pages. The website, therefore, functions as an optional supplement to the book. Readers who would benefit from more than what the book itself offers may, however, overlook the website. Only a keen eye will notice the 'companion website' logo on the book's cover because it is small, positioned on the lower-right and overwhelmed by the background image. The introductory page (p. iii) refers to the website, but the URL – www.routledge.com/cw/petelin – comes later, on the copyright page (p. vi). Readers who miss the URL there can resort to

googling, which leads to Routledge's webpage for *How Writing Works*. That webpage does provide a link to the companion website, but the link is found only after scrolling down past the book's purchase details, description, table of contents, author details and reviews.

However it is accessed, the companion website is worth visiting. The book states that the website 'includes links to video interviews and presentations from leading grammarians … in addition to online quizzes and activities to support readers' learning' (p. iii), and so it does. But it is also a treasure trove for teachers of writing keen to extend their ideas and resources for classroom activities. The website typically reproduces the activities for each of the book's chapters – although not the answers – and supplements them, sometimes abundantly; for example, Chapter 4 in the book has 21 activities on sentences and content words whereas it has 36 on the website. Some occasional glitches, such as misnumbering of activities, mar the website and at times the presentation falls short of the book: some activities are entirely left-justified when judicious indenting or contrasting font would have aided readability. These details can be altered online, so users of the site may see improvements. Even if they do not, students and teachers of writing alike will find plenty of interest on the website, including links to Petelin's own absorbing writing about writing in such places as *The Conversation*.

In an environment with guides to writing aplenty, *How Writing Works*, through its second edition, continues to stand out as a field guide for writers in a university context and beyond. That said, the second edition was published before generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, appeared, so anybody on the lookout for up-front affirmation of the ongoing relevance of (human) writers may be disappointed. A section on 'Using computers for writing and editing' (pp. 272–73) does acknowledge the promises and the pitfalls of technological interventions in writing and mentions an essay in *The Guardian* ('A robot wrote this entire article', 2020) as a 'not-very-convincing' attempt to show that artificial intelligence can replace writers (p. 273). Much has changed since then, and many of us now grapple with questions about what generative AI tools mean for writers and their teachers.

A question for readers – of the book itself and of this review – is whether guides to writing will become redundant. We can now feed prompts into a chatbot that writes for us and even generates text that shows us, as human beings, how to interact via the written word with other human beings. Yet writing essentially concerns communication between people and involves understanding of the attendant complexities. As Anne Surma (2005, pp. 17–18) says about professional writing, we can see writing 'as a creative, critical and dialogic process, central to which is the imaginative negotiation of rhetorical and ethical issues and choices relating to language and to its forging of specific relations between writers and readers'. Imagination, then, is the very human attribute behind writing that works, and that ensures the ongoing need for guides such as Petelin's.

Amid the recent flurry of experiments, webinars and commentary on ChatGPT, I asked students in my professional writing class whether they will choose to use chatbots for writing. The resounding answer was no. They said they want to experience the satisfaction of being working writers and writing workers who are informed and skilled, and confident in their craft. They

said they value writing of all kinds as a process and product that enables them to connect with other people.

All of us should hope for a third edition of *How Writing Works*.

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