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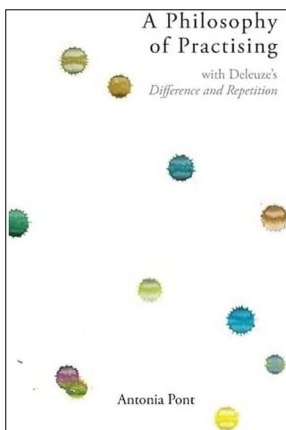
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TEXT review

“Practising” as a philosophy of transformation

review by James Vicars



Antonia Pont

A Philosophy of Practising: with Deleuze's Difference and Repetition

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh UK, 2021

ISBN 9781474490467

Hb & Pb 230pp AUD215.90 (Hb) AUD62.25 (Pb)

One could, from the title, mistake Antonia Pont's remarkable book for a narrowly focused contribution to the philosophical literature on the work of Gilles Deleuze. This would be ironic, as *A Philosophy of Practising* is neither iterative in terms of its engagement with the work of Deleuze nor shaped merely to a gap in the philosophical field. It is a more expansive accomplishment that, with unwavering precision as well as a distinctive kindness to the reader, claims “practising” as a locus of transformation that bears on notions as slippery as difference, becoming and time.

It is something of a provocation to offer a philosophy of practising when this key word is so commonplace: it's just *doing practice*, right? Yes ... and no. But without denying the

commonplace, Pont articulates and aligns the meaning of this participle – and the action it can obtain – to a deeper realisation of personal potential in the development of almost any kind of practice, from cooking to golf (though it should be benign, not harming the practitioner or others). The very clear introductory chapter – indeed the first paragraph – explains that, in putting to work the two concepts that make up the title of Gilles Deleuze’s famous work, “difference” and “repetition”, the book seeks out what practising “unleashes and enables, while also querying the precise mechanisms that underpin its strange logics and spin-offs” (p.1).

Pont does this, first, by examining practising as pure form in the guise of *shikantaza* (“just sitting”) from the Zen tradition, which, with its almost complete absence of any aim, instructional detail or promise of result, provides an opportunity to explore what practising *isn’t* as well as gesturing to what it *may offer*, which is transformation (“practising is the pathway via which a wholly new self comes into being or is invented” [p.100], Pont later writes). Her inquiry unfolds via the work of theorists from Félix Ravaisson, Nietzsche and Henri Bergson to Alain Badiou, Elizabeth Grosz and James Williams; along with Deleuze, these provide scaffolding and points of panoramic observation for understanding and developing a philosophy of practising. Throughout, the commentary and synthesis of the work of these authors is striking for its clarity and depth.

Pont provides other points of observation that strongly support this construction, including her own as a long-time practitioner and teacher of yoga. This presages another achievement of the book: the integration of philosophical insights from non-Western sources, such as Dogen’s *Enlightenment Unfolds* and Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, that are both relevant and compelling alongside the Western philosophical approaches within which Deleuze provides “a precise vocabulary with which to articulate its [practising’s] ways” (p.7).

Thus, Pont lays out her criteria for practising: a structural form (the practice(s) or doings) of some kind that is, ideally, benign to the practitioner and others; intentional repetition of the practice over time; relaxation; and repeating repetition “that eclipses the doer and even the content of the practice, becoming itself the ‘content’” (p.19). She notes that “Practising is at once *the art of staging encounters* (transformation), and thereby of *cultivating an ability to withstand them and their strangeness* (stability). It can come in as many guises as there are varied, discrete practices” (p.48).

The book provides an important (and fascinating) analysis of one of the foundations of practising – habit. In fact, it is habit that allows us to function at all in the world and even to exercise creativity. Deleuze refers to “the primary habits that we are; the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed” (p.55). Developing her argument, Pont explains that practising, while performing very similar manoeuvres to habit, remains “*de jure* distinct from it” and that “[i]ntention, precisely inflected, is the point at which it diverges” (p.73). As well, “practice constitutes a means for ‘accessing’ difference in itself – that is, intensive encounters with life – but in ways that are neither haphazard nor despotic” (p.97). The challenge Deleuze takes up is to determine this difference “without defining it in terms of identity and representation” (p.98), and succeeding sections show how the “logics” in

Deleuze's work on difference and repetition are displayed in practising as "an approach to behaviour, to 'living'" (p.100).

To this Pont adds one of the most important aspects of practising: relaxation, or "That Unnatural Effort" as the chapter is subtitled. How vital is this, we may wonder, but relaxation is what gives rise to the easefulness and minimal effort that is a feature of the moments of practising in which transformation can occur. While she calls relaxation "the open secret of practising", Pont notes that "[i]t seems far too simple to be implicated in what practising would seem to promise. It is, and is not, simple" (p.152). Nonetheless, relaxation is a term that can be given to "structured unstructured time", "spacious nothingness" that is perhaps the field for transformative experience.

Pont teases out, over several chapters, the importance of difference and repetition. On one hand, repetition in practising enables difference to emerge. Further though, in Deleuze, repetition is for-itself, which provides the hint that, in practising, it pertains to a not-decided or an unknown Telos. This still involves an intention, but of a different kind. The intention is to practise; that unleashes something (and it emphasises the importance of relaxation as a criterion). Time is implied in repetition, and to situate the manner in which repetition operates, Deleuze conceives three modes in which it produces, or synthesises, time: namely "as habit (living present), then as memory (pure past), and finally as repetition for itself (which 'makes' the future or rather frees time from its subordination to the habitual present and the involuntary past ...)" (p.176). Pont contends that "practising" involves an encounter with all three modes of time; the argument of the book is that "practising accompanies, or indeed enacts, the very ontological moments that Deleuze articulates" (p.180). She writes that

Practising learns time, so to speak, by setting up a laboratory that deploys the very moves of this interaction between structure and repetition; it 'imitates' or 'stages' those basic operations which constitute the registers of becoming. It is not a metaphor for them: it is their dramatisation, as such. (p.180)

This is a taste of what this book offers, and its flavour is complex yet generous. There are occasional tables that help group the conceptual frameworks, and it reflects the way Pont brings the reader along with her thinking. In this respect, she has woven it with a thread of compassion because it is a scholarly work of a very high order and necessarily dense in places for the sake of precision: without this, including the sometimes complex terminology (the reader might need to flip back to check they know what the First or Second Passive Synthesis of Time means, for example), "practising" might lack the necessary foundations to be established with philosophical rigour. (Having done so, this provides the basis for a subsequent book for students, practitioners or more general readers, perhaps.) However, Pont takes pains to avoid needless abstraction, her tangents and footnotes are relevant and expansive, and her prose maintains a delicacy and curvature that is inseparable from its precision.

While this is a work of philosophy, it can be read as a work of spirit; it also suggests itself as a course of study. It encompasses subtle understandings, not the least of which is that practising,

in the sense explicated here, is not simply to be grasped as a “thing” or “action”, but might be said to lead from, and to, itself. If the flow and elegance of Antonia Pont’s thought and scholarship are an exemplar of “practising”, there is much to admire and to thank her for in this work.

A writer of fiction, essays, journalism and poetry, James Vicars teaches at UNE, Curtin and Deakin universities. His biographical work, Beyond the Sky: the passions of Millicent Bryant, aviator, was published in 2020.



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TEXT review

Simple ingredients, expertly prepared

review by Amelia Walker



Owen Bullock

Pancakes for Neptune

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2023

ISBN 9780645651249

Pb 92pp AUD19.95

In 2010, then fourteen-year-old Laura Dekker set forth to become the youngest person to singlehandedly circumnavigate the world by boat. The documentary, *Maidentrip* (dir. Schlesinge 2013), includes videos Dekker made at sea, in one of which the young adventurer cooks pancakes and flips the first overboard, joking that it's for Neptune. The opening poem and title of Owen Bullock's new poetry collection, *Pancakes for Neptune*, were inspired by Dekker's literal throwaway yet contextually poignant gesture. There could be no title more apt for the seriously playful suite of poems Bullock's book presents.

Ingredients-wise, pancakes are a simple food: eggs, milk, flour, sugar, butter, a pinch of bi-carb. One could go so far as to call them egalitarian: no lavish budget or hard-to-source delicacies are required to cook pancakes well, meaning that, in theory at least, the pancake is a

luxury feast more widely accessible than most. [1] But the catch is, you have to master the knack of cooking them just right. Pour the batter too thin, turn the heat too low, and it's a gooey mouthful of stodge. Do the opposite and you have a hard, dry charcoal crisp. Then there's the pancakes that wind up on the ceiling. Or the floor. Or knotted round themselves like soggy wannabe pretzels. Flipping pancakes with precision takes skill, care, and ongoing practice. This is how and why they make a perfect analogy for the poems in Bullock's new book.

Bullock's words and subject matters – his raw ingredients – are generally humble. In line with the conventions of the Japanese-inspired forms and imagist approaches notable throughout the collection, Bullock resists literary fireworks of figurative language or show-off phrasing for its own sake, tending instead towards minimalist, straightforward descriptions of what are often quite commonplace scenes and events – for instance, the creation of a permaculture community garden in 'A Permablitz day (10-4)' (p. 3); choosing clothes in an op-shop in 'Options' (p. 10); and waiting in an airport lounge in 'From here to there and almost back' (p. 29-31). But, as with the skilled pancake chef, it's through skilled handling of these plain materials that Bullock manages to serve up something special. In line with the idea that poetry can 'make the familiar strange', or in other words, re-awaken readers to forms of strangeness and wonder that are always there but forgotten in the throng of quotidian pushing-on (Erickson in Certo 2017, p. 34), Bullock's keen observation and attention to fine details brings forth the curious mixtures of beauty, pain, frailty, and absurdity that populate even the most everyday of experiences. This fine approach shines, for instance, in Bullock's description of a community coming together in the poem on permaculture:

Rob taught us the bindings
for the bamboo tripods
with flax or string
Rose designed the trellis
of hazelnut switches
James dismantled pallets
and Hugo turned them into compost bins (p. 3)

Likewise compelling are the opening lines to 'What didn't happen today' (which, via attention to things that could have but didn't unfold, begs unanswered questions about what did):

A chubby-legged poodle called Brandy didn't waddle across the oval
A gull didn't soar slow and alight
A woman didn't stand and gaze waiting for her dog to return
The sun didn't set over Black Mountain, fiery orange, burning yellow (p. 79)

It's tempting to describe Bullock's style as one of simplicity, but I think precision is a better word: in my experiences at least, the appearance of ease in poetry is typically hard-won and finely honed through careful working and reworking. This is especially notable in the many short haiku-esque [2] poems, in which not one unnecessary word appears. For example, a sequence called 'Swipe' includes the following gems:

art gallery
your reflections
my pebble (p. 18)

city lights
the heron
bewildered (p. 19)

Another example is ‘From Here to There and Almost Back’, which opens:

waiting to go
your eyelashes more mascara
at the ends

airport lounge
a young man chews a sandwich
magnanimously bored (p. 29)

At the other end of the spectrum, *Pancakes for Neptune* also includes many fine prose poems. Among these, one I particularly enjoyed was ‘A place for the Phantom’, which characterises the balance of humour and seriousness Bullock so often manages to pull off so well. It begins:

The Phantom got away (again). A train to Liverpool, he bribed passage to Australia. A tiny porthole, seasickness twisting his body into half a man, and half again—many’s the time he thought he was dying. The ship in early, he disembarked on a rope. Spent six months scrimping, delivering pizza. (8)

In ‘Options’, Bullock brings long- and short-form impulses together in a haibun – a form of poetry that combines a prose section or sections with one or more haiku. In this instance, the haibun includes two sections: the first of prose poetry, the second three haiku-esque lines at the end. As earlier noted, the prose component of ‘Options’ poem describes op-shopping. The final three lines, however, evoke a very different scene:

little boy
on the plane, looking for
the magic (p. 10)

Through the juxtaposition, or indeed the mysterious gap between the explicit topics featured in the two sections of this poem, Bullock invites the reader to wonder what the connection is, and thus to ponder the implicit themes that might link them. This, in my view, is what a good haibun should do – again, something that can seem on the surface quite simple, but which takes practice and precision to pull off well. Additionally, the closing three lines of ‘Options’ introduce a motif of travel and flying, thus connecting it to other poems exploring this same theme throughout the book. Among my favourites in the collection are the travel poems where Bullock re-purposes what seem to be direct lines of overheard dialogue. ‘UK’ includes lines such as ‘*Dunfermline’s like a mini Edinburgh / multicultural caffees and stuff, ken*’ and ‘*ants*

might get me fingers!’ and *‘beer is food’* (p. 32) with a lack of context or explanation leaving readers to play the compelling game of wondering in what situations these phrases were uttered, by whom, and why. A similar approach appears in *‘Tongue’*, which reads like a collision of random social media posts or thoughts from the minds of multiple contradictory thinkers:

*my dreams aren’t good enough
I dreamed I was boiling pasta*

I don’t know why I’m exerting pressure

*as soon as you get a boyfriend
you stress*

can mung beans go so wrong?

my kids are trying to kill me (p. 37)

‘Riding’ (p. 67), another haibun, also deploys the technique of repurposing given materials, but in quite a different way. As Bullock’s notes explain, *‘Riding’*:

reacts to BBC News reports from the US about Trump’s idea of building a wall around America and a rampaging killer in Kansas. The two stories are juxtaposed as you would experience different news items and further contrasted with more innocent events in Canberra—the link being that both locations involve helicopters. (p. 82)

Though disturbing, *‘Riding’* was for me one of the highlights of the collection. Through the simultaneous juxtapositions and links it plays upon, it raises important if uncomfortable political issues, but in a non-didactic way that allows readers to recognise and reflect on those issues in their own ways, for themselves.

Overall, *Pancakes for Neptune* represents a fine new collection from a prolific and unique poetic voice. The mixture of styles keeps things formally interesting, while the interplays of humour with seriousness provides a well-paced balance of light and shades. I enjoyed this collection and look forward to reading what Bullock produces next.

Notes

[1] The idea of pancakes as an accessible food becomes rather questionable if veganism and gluten intolerance are taken into consideration. I am actually both these things. The analogy is not meant to be taken literally.

[2] I write *‘haiku-esque’* to avoid getting drawn into debates about what does and does not qualify as a haiku in English: Bullock’s poems reflect influences from haiku, haibun, tanka, and other Japanese forms, but he works with the traditions flexibly, reworking them for his own contexts and purposes, which in my view is fitting and key to how poetic forms live on.

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Amelia Walker lectures in creative writing at the University of South Australia, on Kurna Yerta. Her fifth poetry collection, alogopoiesis, is forthcoming with Life Before Man (Gazebo Press) in November 2023.



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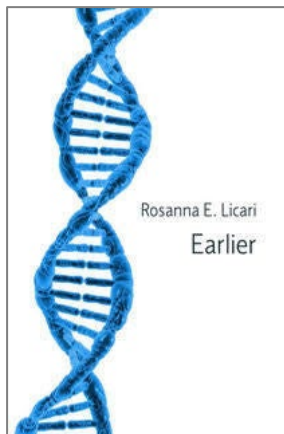
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TEXT review

From the beginning

Review by Stephanie Green



Rosanna E. Licari

Earlier

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA, 2023

ISBN 9781761094682

Pb 130pp AUD25.00

Rosanna E. Licari's new poetry collection, *Earlier*, explores the theme of origins and the experience of creation in this sensitively wrought evocation of the human and non-human world. While drawing on references to science and history to invoke palaeolithic perspectives, *Earlier* is about more than the evolutions of existence. It is also a deeply personal account of intimate memories: childhood mysteries, family losses, creature encounters, giving birth, and the strife of climate change. These are linked by subtle reflections on writing and the breaths taken between thought, hand and page in the making of a poem.

The title poem, "Earlier", is the first offered in the collection. Here, Licari writes of the transformation that brought the universe into being, honouring the earliest of the four Hindu

Rig Vedas, the “Hymn of Creation”. Figuring the beginning of the world as an explosion into light, Licari writes: “Perhaps, the loneliness wanted / to share its darkness, / to jounce its inert insomnia, / blow form into the shapeless nothing” (p. 11). The poet introduces loneliness as an inchoate emotion, almost as an abstract impulse, desiring to take form. The word jounce, in the third line of this opening passage, offers a lively and immediate contrast with its reminiscence of babies being jounced on knees. Rapidly, however, the poem bursts into a vivid impression of universal creation with, “...a brilliance that was wide and fierce. / The flame of a million stars” (p. 11). This is a creation that, like the Vedas themselves, becomes “a play of cycles”, shifting from ancient to modern impressions and concerns. Through the energy of her opening, Licari alludes as much to the spark that, for a writer, animates a poem – and indeed a collection of poems – as to universal generation.

Earlier is divided by sections, sub-titled with text fragments drawn from the poems themselves. The sub-titles signal the knowledge and ideas flowing from evidence and experience that Licari foregrounds. These serve to group the poems and pose clues as to how we might think about her work, as readers. The section called “no skullcap will fetter ideas”, for example, commences with a meditation on the evolutionary evidence revealed in the fossil remains of the *Archaeopteryx*. Licari characterises the *Archaeopteryx*, somewhat endearingly, as “a wishbone / begging for flight” (p. 30), reminding us that the acquisition of knowledge demands inquiry and determination, even sacrifice.

In the next poem of that same section, “Blaze”, Licari moves to a visceral and intensely poignant account of the execution of Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), who was burnt at the stake in Rome for refuting Catholic doctrine. She creates a scene as intensely bleak as her subject: “Winter, and there are no flowers on the Campo de’ Fiori / Mouth vised, you are tied to the stake on a mound of branches. / Smoke rises to the cold sky” (p. 31). Through its references to cold winter, the absence of bright flowers symbolising repressed thought and joy, and the harshness of Bruno’s silencing by the “vise”, the poem expresses the cruelty that fear and ignorance all too often entail.

The remaining poems in this section extend the theme of scientific evidence, referring to important Paleolithic discoveries. These include Mary Anning’s identification of Jurassic fossils in Britain, John Lucas’s efforts to protect the Jenolan Caves in New South Wales, and the discovery of Lucy, the marvellous hominid who changed human understandings of early bipedal evolution.

In the section “a bristling corpus that stretches and champs”, we turn from archaic traces to the female body and its representations, ancient and contemporary. First, to “New Eve” (p. 41) who “slid from a womb” that has been “made / from no man’s rib”, but is instead bound with the earth, her bones “thick with life” as she takes form. In the wonderful poem “My Palaeolithic Self” (p. 43-44), with its epigraph reference to the Venus of Willendorf, the poet celebrates the becoming of the woman maker, the rich cycle of her “ochre-bellied” fertility, her communal bond with other women, and the living world around them on which they depend to survive.

The theme of origins is one that Licari returns to throughout the collection in various ways, from the ancient shifting of tectonic plates and the life cycle of the penguin, to glimpses of lives forced to shift across continents and the difficult genesis of a poem. Tracing family losses and legacies, in the next section, entitled “and the doctor will join my head, heart and life lines”, the poet meditates on facing surgery, and the limits and possibilities of medical repair. She alludes to a complex European heritage, family tragedy, and the disorientation of being born in Rijeka, when the city belonged to “a country that doesn’t exist any more” (p. 81).

The final two sections turn more on the poet’s affinity with Australia, expressing moments of connection and disconnection, pleasure and concern. The poem “Casualty”, for example, portrays a South-East Queensland beach, its tideline littered with plastic pollution’s poisonous shards (p. 121). The poet stoops to indulge her gratitude for nature and her romanticism is slapped down by the cold shock of reality as “a brisk wave slaps my face” (p. 121).

Licari is not alone in exploring scientific questions and discoveries in her poetry. Poetic interest in science has emerged more strongly in recent years, partly encouraged by significant developments in ecological literature, but also by new scientific research and new interest in the Humanities in the cultural expression of evidentiary knowledge. Tricia Dearborn’s *Autobiochemistry* (2019) is a case in point, as is her editorship of *Rabbit* poetry journal’s Science issue in 2020. Michael Leach is another writer who has set out to communicate science through poetry with his poetry collections *Chronicity* (2020) and *Natural Philosophies* (2022). Like Licari, these poets remind us that words are not just abstractions. Words inform us, just as they also warn, console, inspire and urge us to recognise the tangible world we inhabit and our impact on the ecology of Earth. As Iovino reminds us, literature is also a product of the natural world, emerging “in the process of our evolution as living things” (2018, p. 112).

With this latest collection, Rosanna E. Licari has fulfilled a major creative milestone. Her poems take on various forms to suit her purpose, written with intricate delicacy and power. In many ways, *Earlier* is a book of deep listening; to the voices of the present and the past, including those that should prompt us to understanding and action.

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Stephanie Green is a widely published Australian writer, and an Adjunct Senior Lecturer with Griffith University. Her creative writing is published in various literary magazines, creative anthologies and scholarly journals including Meniscus, Axon, TEXT, StylusLit, Live Encounters, Not Very Quiet, Burrow and Griffith Review. She has published several collections including a volume of prose poems, Breathing in Stormy Seasons (Recent Work Press, 2019) and a selection of short stories, Too Much too Soon (Pandanus 2006). Her latest collection of poems will be released by Calanthe Press in November 2023.



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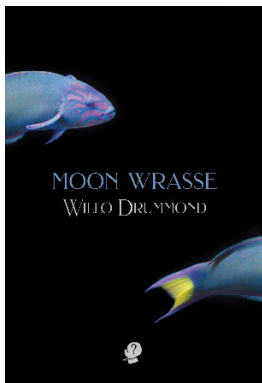
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TEXT review

Lyric permeability, copresence and the remaking of identity in Willo Drummond's *Moon Wrasse*

review by Sophie Finlay



Willo Drummond

Moon Wrasse

Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah NSW, 2023

ISBN 9781922571670

Pb 80pp AUD25.00

Moon Wrasse offers a poetic space in which human identity entangles inextricably with the species, assemblages and ecosystems of the natural world. The poems of this collection are vulnerable, personal and dialogic, formed intertextually with poets such as Louise Gluck, Denise Levertov and Rainer Maria Rilke, deepening their rich and complicated entanglements. *Moon Wrasse* presents a sophisticated, emotive and organic lyric incorporating elegy, ecopoetry and permeability.

In the opening poem, “Seed”, the poet places her “grief” into a seed pod and releases it into a river to float away. The luminous atmosphere of the river is created with these lines of lyric imagery:

she sets her grief in a small seed pod

sends it out across the river.

In waning luminescence

on the aqua-terrestrial shore (p. 7)

The poet's grief contained within each "furred pod" as it "gains its wild purpose" (p. 7), sets the tone of *Moon Wrasse* as a dynamic collection of lyrical elegies that flow much like the river of this first poem. This is a collection that burgeons into poetic being through the streams and rivulets of the self, and through both personal and ecological losses. Each poem pours into the next, gathering momentum as the collection courses through its imagined terrain.

The poems of *Moon Wrasse* flow into one another and occur in dialogue with other poets. In "The act of making", Drummond calls upon Louise Gluck's "Love Poem" and "The Wild Iris", poems that perform the act of letting go to remake something out of pain. In Gluck's "The Wild Iris", first published 1992, the voice of the iris bulb expresses the suffering of being "buried in the dark earth". As it begins to grow a shoot through the earth, the iris "returns from oblivion ... to find a voice", eventually blooming into "a great fountain, deep blue" (Gluck 2012, p. 245). Drummond draws upon this extraordinary poem to generate her own passage out of pain:

"There is always something to be made
of pain," she said. A claret scarf. A souffle. Misshapen

gardens fecund with memory and fluffed
intentions. How can you bear

so many imagined blooms heavy with scent of hope (p. 11)

Intertextuality, first defined by Kristeva (1980, p. 66), is a recognition that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another", creating an interrelationship between them. This acts on a reader's prior knowledge to shape their understanding within a new articulation. Intertextuality is critical to this poem that is created in negotiation with the traditions of lyric. "The act of making" blooms through the prior form of Gluck's poem, remaking the lyric self in the process. The poem reveals a porous, permeable and embodied subjectivity in a state of openness to the more-than-human plant world of bulb dormancy, growth and flowering, and to a new articulation of identity.

The entire collection of *Moon Wrasse* reveals this idea of a porous self, evolving and re-evolving in conversation with other poetic voices, the environment, and the complicated interconnections that make us deeply human. The concept of "permeability" provided by editors Russo and Reed (2018), defines a self in mediation with the various material assemblages and entanglements of the human and more-than-human:

Permeability: a porousness that insists upon the copresence of the other, of the outside, of the self as other... A state of compassion and vulnerability that is an opening of the self and an acknowledgment of the various systems (people, objects, animals, ecosystems, histories) that compose the self. (2018, p. 54)

The concept of permeability is significant to this collection of poems that offer themselves to be encountered, remade and to continue their growth beyond the page. The poem “Some words for migratory birds”, provides an example of this insistence on copresence. In this work, the poet’s voice speaks in the copresence of the migratory bird, the “you” of the poem, and the ecosystem of flight paths, while allowing for a subjectivity that weaves in and out of the lyric:

you taught me to read star-maps
under a blush of sea-sprayed moonlight

Direction was magnetic
then: I-you-she-he-we
moved shore-to-shore (p. 24)

There is an expansive sense of intersubjectivity in this work, inclusive of bird, human and a suite of pronouns encompassing many trajectories of identity in the phrase: “I-you-she-he-we”.

Identity is a key aspect of the titular poem “Moon Wrasse”. This work is informed by the experience of gender transition from the perspective of a life partner. The Moon Wrasse species of fish are protogynous hermaphrodites, capable of gender transition, a capacity reflected in the lines:

Here
you are
forming, transforming
twinkling your webbed toes
shaking your tail
crescent. Lyre-wrasse (p. 59)

The imagery of the transformed fish “clear as the blue / of your new man suit” (p. 59) as it dances, is one of the many striking images found throughout Drummond’s luminous and complex poetic material. We find images of a seeding mangrove tree, tender grass underfoot, a skin shed among leaf litter, monsoonal bodies.

In *Moon Wrasse*, Drummond demonstrates a flexible, nascent lyric, full of complications, loss and possibility. Drummond’s subjectivity is intertextual, polyvocal, open to transformation and attuned to the copresence of the other. The more-than-human flows through this collection like the river of the first poem “Seed”, and like a river, the lyric self it embodies is fluid and permeable. *Moon Wrasse* is fluent in the aesthetic capabilities of language to encapsulate the complexities of being alive in the present moment of ecological crisis, of navigation through

identity, of grief, and the potential for hope.

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Sophie Finlay is a visual artist and poet. She lives, works and creates on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Her poetry is published in multiple journals, including Meanjin, Australian Poetry Journal, Cordite Poetry Review, Plumwood Mountain journal and more. She has also been a finalist in several art prizes including the John Leslie Art Prize and the Salon des Refuses exhibition, Lethbridge Landscape Prize. Sophie is currently a PhD candidate in literary studies and creative writing at Deakin University.



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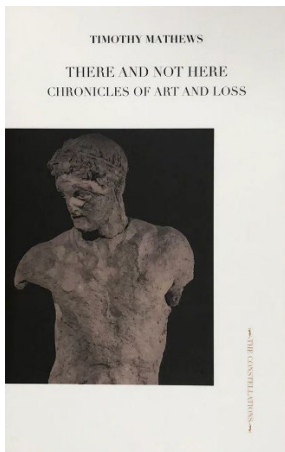
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TEXT review

Im/possible relations, haunted gifts: creative-critical writing at the thresholds of grief, art, and love

review by Amelia Walker



Timothy Mathews

There and Not Here: Chronicles of Art and Loss

MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, London UK, 2022

ISBN 9781910055922

Pb 246pp GBP12.00

As a lecturer and researcher in the field of creative writing, *There and Not Here: Chronicles of Art and Loss* is a book I recommend widely to colleagues and Higher Degree by Research candidates. Although Mathews operates in a field distinct from yet proximal to our own – that of art and literary criticism – the creative-critical praxis he demonstrates is one from which we can learn valuable techniques, particularly for research degree candidates seeking heartfelt approaches to exegetical writing. Writing in a lyrical and personal voice of humble vulnerability, Mathews shows how the act of responding to art can become its own new artistic offering.

In this review I borrow techniques from Mathews, including evocation of my tactile and

emotional experiences reading *There and Not Here*. My aim is to reflect the sensory and affective engagement his writing invites, and the possibilities *There and Not Here* offers for creative writing research.

*

As I opened *There and Not Here: Chronicles of Art and Loss*, I began opening myself to potentials of reading beyond any I had known before, which have changed everything I will ever read again. Though books mustn't be judged by covers alone, I couldn't help relishing the bespoke allure of this text-as-object. Published by MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, the not-for-profit press of artist and writer Sharon Kivland, who 'invites authors she considers to be good readers, whom she would like to house in her library or to become her library, inhabited' (Kivland, 2023), its dimensions are just slightly smaller than standard. Its cover has a non-gloss finish, lightly textured, yet smooth to touch. The spine is thick, the paper of dense weight and quality. As soon as I picked it up I noticed how solid, how pleasant it felt to hold: the attention another human had invested into fine details radiated warmly; the level of care seemed to whisper, *this was worth doing well*.

Turning past the title pages, I came to the acknowledgements. Preceding the list of names, a reflection on the act of acknowledgement itself fed my growing sense of the book as unlike any other I'd encountered. Recognising 'something about a dedication that seems at once to avow and disavow its own vulnerability', Mathews muses on how acknowledgement 'signals that a gift is being made, but there's also a kind of presumption that the gift involved can be accepted, and even that offering it is the right thing to do' (p. 5). My thoughts hopped towards Derrida's 'gift beyond exchange' – the im/possible gift that evades a culturally-normalised gift economy of 'market equivalence' and presumed reciprocation, for '[o]nly beyond value itself, use-value and exchange-value, the value of technics and of the market, is grace promised, if not given, but never rendered or given back to the dance' (2006, p. 201). In Derridean terms, the 'work of mourning' is a dance of knowing and transformation (p. 9) wherein 'guest' and 'host' share semantic links with each other and with 'ghost' (Coughlan 2016, p. 170). Both reading and writing are always haunted, haunting modes of hospitality, the 'impossibility' of which sustains its very 'condition of possibility' (Derrida 2006, p. 82).

Derridean gifts, ghosts, guests and hosts seemed increasingly pertinent to *There and Not Here* as I continued reading Mathews's dedication of his book to 'one who isn't here to receive it, forcing the questions at its heart and which it's still unable to answer' (Mathews 2022, p. 5). The 'one who isn't here' represents Mathews's life partner, lost to illness, yet undeniably present through the still-unfolding meanings of shared experiences and remembered connections. The lengthy list of other people Mathews thanks reflects the importance he ascribes to interpersonal *relation* in praxes of artistic making and appreciation – a focus finely woven throughout *There and Not Here*'s pensively meandering yet always compelling meditations.

The book includes seventeen essays by Mathews, plus a foreword by Rod Mengham and a concluding response by Raymond Guess. Each essay responds to a work or works of art across forms and media including painting, sculpture, film, music, theatre, fiction, poetry, criticism, and more. And each essay is also, subtly or explicitly, an expression of grief, love, and longing for Mathews's late partner. This might sound introspective, but the result is, as already signalled, vitally relational. Mathews reveals the delicate power creativity – in all its forms – bears for bringing people together across distances and sustaining communities of belonging –

even, or perhaps especially in times of radical aloneness. As Mengham observes, Mathews writes from a place of ‘unconscionable loss’ that ‘leaves the survivor in doubt about the validity of their now solitary constructions of meaning and value’ (p. 9). Yet, Mathews avoids the temptations of attempting to suppress grief, instead demonstrating ‘how we can use writing as a means to cooperate with it [grief]’ (p. 10). Mengham likens this grief-cooperation to articulating ‘the contents of a fading dream’ (pp. 10-11):

Dreams are private, but they process conditions that we all share, and artworks are the most effective medium for negotiating the give and take of our desire to protect and rely on, to risk and suspend, the terms of our belonging to one another. (p. 11)

In the first essay, ‘Overture’, Mathews poses un/answerable questions that resonate throughout the book, including ‘what deciding to write is all about’, ‘why art matters’, and ‘the connection of art to life as it’s actually lived’ (p. 13). Regarding writing, Mathews muses:

Writing at its simplest is just one of the many ways of relating to others, its basic elements involve questions of why, how, and who? You aren’t here with me now, and even if you were we’d be engrossed in a world at best distinct and frequently incompatible. What one writes and the other reads is never exactly shared, it’s more like something imagined and re-imagined, and projection is our constant companion; and we’re left to wonder about disentangling generosity from appropriation. (p. 13)

On the questions of art, Mathews poses:

For some, approaching artefacts as documents tells us what we need to know, and artworks are like so many signs of the times, telling how things were and what relation we can have to the past, and the present as well. (p. 14)

Proceeding via consideration of ‘the different kinds of knowledge and different understandings of what an experience of art might give’, Mathews confesses a longstanding sense ‘that artworks are invitations to which I need to respond if I can’ (p. 14). As I read this, it seemed not only a signal of aims and approaches reflected across the book, but an implicit summons to encounter *There and Not Here* with a relationality mirroring that Mathews himself crafts.

Despite a Barthesian recommendation to proceed ‘in any order according to your impulse and as so many points of entry, and entry into questions such as why entering would matter at all’ (p. 15), I on first read approached the essays in their order of appearance. Structurally, I found the book thoughtfully poetic: a pacing of longer and shorter chapters provides rhythm, breath, and punctuation, while patterned motifs of death, time, memory, connection, and desire gather meaning across time. In the four chapters directly following ‘Overture’, Mathews writes of exhibitions by Agnès Thurnauer; the art-book *Jazz* by Henri Matisse (2009); José Saramago’s poetic novel *The Cave* (2002); and Alberto Giacometti’s pictures of Georges Braque’s dead face. In all of these, themes of love, death, and desire for relation echo strongly. Using first person, Mathews welcomes readers into the idiosyncrasies of his bespoke engagements with these works. His grief hovers implicitly – a Derridean spectre – but it is not until the sixth essay, ‘Where There’s Love There’s Light’, that Mathews writes explicitly of the deep personal loss endured, via an intense portrayal of his love on her deathbed. That was the moment when I needed to put the book down. Because it’s so beautiful. And painful. Because it’s real. I wanted to read on. But I couldn’t. Not straight away. Because I was crying, the print swimming, murky

in the wet that had become my eyes:

I couldn't accept that this moment had come, it didn't come to me until later, I was running backwards and into anything, even the terrors of before, at least that was now something and even achieved. I was looking at everything again from strange distances, dispersed into everything and everyone around us other than me, and other than her too. I struggled to pull it all back into me. I started to speak again, but from fear and confusion as much as love. As much not there as there. I should have been strapped to my chair instead I started running around. But when I was there she wanted to know what I was going to do now, I didn't know but I promised her I would try. (p. 46)

After a few days' pause to take things in, I resumed reading, confessedly with some relief that the seventh essay seemed, at least at first, an approach more like that of the opening chapters – still lyrical and personal in voice, but with the art again forming the central focus of explicit discussion. In this instance, the art in question is Velázquez's portrait of Saint Thomas, who in Christian teachings is the saint of doubting, for he refused to believe that Christ had risen from death until allowed to touch and feel the crucifix wounds. Unstated yet undeniable is an irony – that Thomas doubted a rising from the dead, and Mathews writes of viewing this exhibition while struggling to reach acceptance that the one he loves is really lost: '[e]veryone had said their goodbyes somehow, there was only me who hadn't really, always hoping... I loved her, sometimes well, sometimes badly, not well enough to stop, to stop trying, to say good-bye' (p. 47). As the essay continues, critical distance increasingly shifts towards relational proximity as Mathews's affective identifications with the work, artist, and fellow art-viewers burst through via reflections, such as: 'When Thomas doubts he doubts for everyone, doubt covers and shapes him, a doubt that anything can be shared, anything like generosity, or understanding, or pain' (p. 50); and later:

When someone dies, everything begs to be reconstructed. Or she is forgotten. Like Thomas I couldn't believe the wound was real, I still tried there and then to speak the language my life had made for me, and the one of our lives together, as much agape as eros, ever from touch to memory and ever towards the gift of giving. Later when she couldn't speak anymore... I know she replied to all the only words I had, her troubles dispelled for a moment, a moment of her not being forsaken or foresworn. (p. 53)

Subsequent essays in the book continue to hold the fine tension and balance between art criticism and reflections that are simultaneously personal and interpersonal. In a voice of poetic vulnerability at once gutting, humbling, and confronting, Mathews shows how art weaves us, complexly, despite and because of all that pulls us apart. I felt reminded of the short story cycle form, wherein echoes of ideas build rhizomatic connections across earlier and later revelations: later chapters pulled me back to earlier ones, renewed appreciation of which drove me to read and re-read on and on, thus taking up the first essay's introduction to non-linearity, after all. For instance, after reading the twelfth piece, 'Ten Years On', about a monument to Picasso by Antoni Tàpies, I went back to the earlier account of Giacometti's pictures of Braque. Re-reading them together enriched my appreciation for the relationships artists share with artists, as well of those of readers with writing and writers with what we read. Then I re-read Mathews's acknowledgements and felt again, with aching wonder, the critical and creative significance of friendship, love, and closeness, in which there is inevitably also distance, suffering and loss. It is so necessary to commemorate these things. And so impossible. And Mathews handles that im/possibility with such grace.

There and Not Here is a book that takes time. Having now wandered through it several times over, I will yet again read it over. And over. And each time, I know it will gift me something new – little as I can guess what those un/imaginable gifts will be. It's a book that opens differently depending where, why, how, and at what moment one turns or returns to it. As noted at the start, I strongly recommend *There and Not Here* to colleagues and research degree candidates, especially those seeking ways to bring heart into exegetical writing. Mathews shows how it is possible to practice criticism through being creative – to analyse not from dull distance but with and in the thickness of life and living in all its messy wonder.

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Amelia Walker lectures in creative writing at the University of South Australia, on Kaurua Yerta. Her fifth poetry collection, alogopoiesis, is forthcoming with Life Before Man (Gazebo Press) in November 2023.



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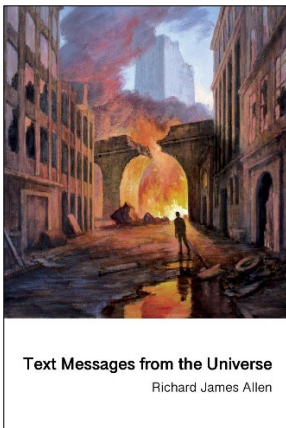
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TEXT review

An odd way to be born

review by Michele Seminara



Richard James Allen

Text Messages from the Universe

Flying Island Books, Sydney NSW, 2023

ISBN 9780645550313

Pb & e-book 113pp AUD10.00 (Pb) AUD5.00 (e-book)

Text Messages from the Universe begins with a dedication from its author, Richard James Allen, that reads “For My Virgils”, a reference to Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s literary masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, which depicts its protagonist’s arduous journey through the afterlife.

Here, Allen is referring to the ancient Roman poet Virgil, who functions in *The Divine Comedy* to guide its lost and despairing narrator, Dante, through the horrors of the Inferno and revelations of Purgatorio (although it transpires that he cannot – as an unbaptised, albeit virtuous pagan – guide Dante to his ultimate destination, Paradiso).

Similarly, in *Text Messages*, modern-day readers are afforded a guided tour through the afterlife, with Allen as our Virgil. Allen's vision, however, draws not just from Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (which depicts a distinctly Middle-Age tour of the Christian conception of heaven and hell) but is heavily influenced by Eastern spiritual and yogic traditions, particularly by the 8th-century Buddhist text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which charts an experience of what Buddhists call the Bardo, the intermediate state between life and rebirth.

In forty-nine linked prose poems, which correspond to the forty-nine days of the soul's journey through the Bardo, Allen's *Text Messages from the Universe* guides us from the moment of death – which (spoiler alert) takes the form of “you” being mown down in a car accident – to an enigmatic awakening that culminates in “your rebirth as sky” (p. 95).

Strap in, because during this spiritual voyage you mostly won't be sure what's happening or which direction you're heading in. As Allen writes in Part One of the book (An Introduction to Dying: An Odd Way to be Born): “You are falling in slow motion. It feels like you are being dragged upwards into the sky. How is that possible? How is any of this possible?” (p. 9).

This sense of spatial discombobulation pervades *Text Messages* and harks back once again to *The Divine Comedy*, in which the terrified Dante descends to the last of the nine circles of hell to be told by Virgil that the only way up is down, the only way out is through, and that he must climb even further – down Lucifer's very body, which is frozen waist-deep in ice – if he wishes to exit hell. Putting Dante on his back and gripping the devil's frozen tufts of hair, Virgil lowers himself to Lucifer's waist, then turns himself around and begins climbing back upward. Dante notes with amazement that Lucifer's legs now appear to rise above them, and his heads (all three of them!) are below. Virgil explains that they have just passed through the centre of the Earth, and sure enough, they soon find themselves on the other side of the world where Dante begins his ascent to paradise via the mountain of purgatory. Similarly, in Allen's *Text Messages*, at the transitional point of death, which opens the first, short section of the book, all sense of direction is lost – or perhaps gained; direction being merely a matter of relativity.

This confusion compounds as we enter the book's second, longer section, The Book of Bad Dreams, where we find people who “think they are walking upright, but they are dancing upside down!” (p. 23). It is initially confounding (one suspects purposefully so) until you realise that what Allen is encouraging his reader to explore in this long narrative poem is the realm of their own mind. And that the disorientation which both the reader and speaker of the poem experience results from having lost their guiding point of measurement for movement through the universe – “You”. In metaphorically dying, you, the reader, have lost your “self”, that is, both your physical form (which in the poems *appears* to exist but keeps morphing) and your identity, which you keep forgetting. As Allen challenges: “You. You think you know who I am talking to. You think it must be you. You who knows who you are. You who will know what to do” (p. 20).

As the poem progresses, it becomes apparent that “you” are now dead, and that without a central, unifying sense of self it is difficult, perhaps even meaningless, to ascertain up from down. In Allen's afterlife, everything is in transition and flux. The reader is cast as a lost soul, wandering the paths of their mind in search of a safe place to harbour, blown by the winds of

karma in a dreamlike state that is marked by “endless rhythms of waking and sleeping, birthing and deathing, climbing up and falling down” (p. 58).

It is no accident that *Text Messages* features both poetic dance imagery and photographic images of dance. To dance, one needs excellent proprioception, that is, awareness of the position and movement of one’s body in relation to itself and space. The word proprioception is from the Latin *proprius*, meaning “one’s own”, and *capio*, to “take” or “grasp”. Thus, to grasp and know one’s own position. The poems and photographs in *Text Messages* are giddy explorations of losing one’s sense of position, one’s inherent self, but learning to be okay with that. Of learning how to exist without clinging to a unifying but ultimately limiting sense of “I”; of discovering liberation outside the cycle of grasping at “me”, which generates a “you” and – suggests Allen – damns us all to exist separated from both our divine source and each other.

There is a danger that readers of *Text Messages* could get permanently lost in its swirling, dreamlike action, but amid its discombobulating imagery and esoteric subject matter, there is also clarity and progression. Just as Virgil guides Dante’s spiritual journey in *The Divine Comedy*, Allen guides his reader towards personal revelations by asking that we open ourselves to the possibility that “there is nothing but ideas. You live in a sea of ideas. You think you live on dry land, with solid things, but that is only because you dream it so” (p. 71). Through a series of questions and provocations, the poet leads the reader towards the potentially liberating view that “perhaps ... you are an actor” playing “a character that you must put on” (p. 49), or perhaps you even “manifest yourself” as the author of your own story (p. 73).

Yet, as we contemplate these metanarratives, Allen again moves us on, suggesting that words and stories can only take us so far; even they must be dissolved when they are no longer useful. The endpoint of *Text Messages* is, fittingly, not a still point but a merging with the universe’s eternally present flux. Just as Dante concludes his journey in the realm of Paradiso by gazing upon, then revolving with, the wheel of “Eternal Light” that is the “love that moves the sun”, so Allen leaves us “wheeling, circling” with the black and white gulls of our conceptions, until they too dissipate, leaving the sky of our mind “empty of thoughts” as we “float outside of death” in “the eye of enlightenment” (pp. 94-95).

Text Messages takes us on an ambitious spiritual exploration of our true nature. In his poem “Little Gidding”, T.S. Eliot famously wrote that “the end of all our exploring/ will be to arrive where we started/ and know the place for the first time”. In the largely secular and outwardly-focused Western world, Allen’s unique poetic narrative succeeds in showing that to “find yourself” you don’t necessarily need to go anywhere; you just need to realise that “you are never actually lost, you are always actually found” (p. 91).

Michele Seminara is a poet and editor from Sydney. She has published two chapbooks and two full-length collections, her most recent being Suburban Fantasy (UWA Publishing, 2020).



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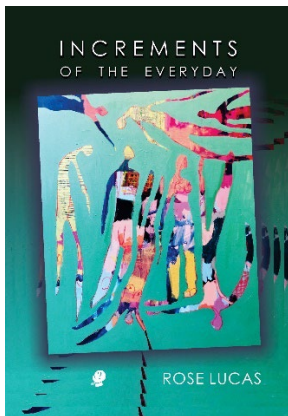
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TEXT review

“Captured Air”

review by Ella Jeffery



Rose Lucas

Increments of the Everyday

Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah NSW, 2022

ISBN 9781922571796

Pb 100pp AUD25.00

Rose Lucas’s fourth book, *Increments of the Everyday*, is about grief and loss, grappling with distance and isolation, and about the body’s fragility and resilience. The collection is wide-ranging and attentive to “the breathy currents of other worlds” (p. 13) that become legible, or at least visible, when the pace of everyday life slows or stops.

The book is divided into five sections, beginning with “Hiatus Diary”, a series of reflective and observational poems concerning life in lockdown. The second section, “Impossible”, centres on a long sequence lamenting the death of a young woman, Sophie. “Woman, Watching”, the third section, is densely textured, concerning domesticity and subtle undercurrents of malice and threat, coupled with the meditative satisfactions of quotidian routines and objects. The fourth section, “Palette”, picks up on the ekphrastic preoccupations that drove Lucas’s previous

collection, *This Shattered Eye* (2021). In the final, eponymous section Lucas considers the body and its combination of strength and instability via a long sequence that documents a severe accident, subsequent hospitalisation, and slow recovery.

Lucas's focus on the quotidian spans all five sections, each of which contains poems that concern everyday tasks and places like washing dishes, observing wildlife like birds and bats, the tableaux of daily routines, as well as newer daily routines necessitated by the pandemic, such as daily walks "topping // and tailing long days of inside" (p. 22), or the "proliferation of masks" (p. 29) that accumulate in cars and on benchtops. The tone of these poems is at times gentle, at times terse with anxiety and Lucas's lines are filled with caesurae which establish a series of pauses that slow the poems' pacing. This halting rhythm echoes the stilted rhythms of life during lockdown as well as periods of great grief, when the regular pattern of everyday life fractures or disappears entirely.

Acts of communication are often fraught in *Increments of the Everyday* – at once essential and impossible, full of desire and threat. In "streets of my isolation", for example, the act of neighbourly greeting is tinged with the suspicion of the pandemic's early stages, where "we greet each other with nods // and a wide berth / apologetic our conversations reaching out like streamers / while we move apart" (p. 22-23). At work here is the movement of pull and push that drives this collection – the human impulse toward tenderness and connection positioned against uncertainty and fear, as the possibility of disaster hovers over simple daily greetings. In "masking", communication is of course obstructed by ubiquitous face masks, and verbal communication becomes "muffled by three layers of fabric" (p. 29). In place of speech the masks themselves become "wearable signs" that demonstrate mood or tone, while in "long distance call", an outstanding poem in this collection, an unsettling, nostalgic tone emerges in the poem's evocation of memory and distance.

The first section, devoted to the anxieties and disruptions of 2020, is memorable in its use of texture and sound, particularly in poems like "Midnight Garden" and "Unsettlement" where the familiar neighbourhood is rendered uncanny and enigmatic. In others in this section, such as "Anxiety" and "Year of Breath", the generous lineation and languid pacing sometimes feel at odds with the "choke of tightness" (p. 32) the poems describe. In the following stanza from "surprising", the anxiety of public spaces feels more summative than immersive:

we didn't know
that we would find ourselves
here watching numbers so closely
nervous to sit in cafes
or trams or offices even
to leave the shelter of our homes (p. 31)

The lines describe a sense of nervousness, but this feeling remains elusive in the imagery and pacing. The poem reproduces familiar ideas and sensations we might hear in daily conversation

about the pandemic, which for me makes it less striking compared with the collection's more arresting and unsettling apprehensions of fear, grief and fragility in sections two, four and five.

“Palette”, the compelling fourth section, contains a series of poems that respond to art, music, and history. Here, Lucas’s use of caesura and the sprawling arrangement of lines across the field of the page produces a compelling tension: the poem’s shape replicates the lacunae we confront when attempting to communicate transformative or transcendent experiences. In “The Texture of the Fugue”, Lucas writes:

a universe hangs
in this cleared space
these notations of pause and
 sound

wait
and longing – (p. 82)

This poem is as a response to Glenn Gould's performance of Bach's "Art of the Fugue" in which the speaker is transported by the music's "clotted texture / its miracles of clarity" (p. 82). However, the above stanza might also be read as a summary of the broader thematic and aesthetic preoccupations of *Increments of the Everyday*. The collection is filled with "wait / and longing", balanced with a delicate sense that in moments of turmoil – loss, injury, pandemic – a "cleared space" emerges in which the "universe hangs". We see clearly the things that make up the world: flowers, sky, benchtops, grass, fences, front doors. Lucas draws our attention to objects and boundaries that are at once mundane and sublime, which she renders in this book of poems as "notations of pause and / sound". The domestic imagery that abounds – back yard fruit trees, bats, sunlight, grass – are things that continue to move and change, even as regular life, through various personal and global calamities, is brought to a standstill.

The final section is striking in its exploration of an entirely different sort of upheaval to the global disruption of the pandemic. The section comprises a single sequence of poems beginning with an accident that befalls the speaker, and moving through the process of hospitalisation, treatment and recovery. In the first section it is the entire world that becomes fragile, but in the final section it is the body's fragility that emerges as the last and most complex obstacle. How to be at home in both the world and in the body when each is so fallible?

The title of the first poem in the sequence is “Accident” and the poem depicts the speaker’s injury as it occurs. The jolting repetition of sounds in “chest”, “step” and “stopped” produces an arresting rhythm that echoes the speaker’s series of hard falls:

torso back
chest
slamming on railing
wall then step

until I'm stopped and
held in the tight angle of the landing (p. 93)

The final section extends on and re-interprets the pandemic's effects on the individual. In the first section, it is a disaster that befalls us all, threatens our physical safety and autonomy, our sense of home and our comfort in moving through the world, while in the final section the disaster is personal, but those same concerns emerge – the world and the home, the shock that “only moments before this same body / sliced so easily through the air of the everyday” (p. 93). Hospitalised, the speaker is again in a situation where communication is difficult and isolation is the norm. Growing stronger after the accident, she walks through the hospital's corridors “where unknown patients lie / each encased in a privacy of pain / and enduring / not meeting my eye” (p. 96). This recalls the uncomfortable exchanges in the first section, in which neighbours meeting on the street greet each other apprehensively, maintaining distance. If the pandemic looms as a threat of illness, disease, hospitalisation, this threat is realised at the end of the book, not through Covid but through an entirely unexpected accident, and this reversal is an unnerving and compelling end to the collection.

In Lucas's poems, delicate and complex glimpses of everyday life accumulate, forming a record of the world in stasis – the pandemic's standstill, yes, but also the immobilising nature of grief, and the “intensified hiatus” (p. 97) of recovery after serious injury. What brings these together in *Increments of the Everyday* is the transition from stillness to gentle movement, as fragility softens and finds a new rhythm in a changed but enduringly captivating world.

Ella Jeffery is a poet, editor and academic. Her debut collection of poems, Dead Bolt, won the Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poems, the Anne Elder Award, and was shortlisted for the Dame Mary Gilmore Award. Her poetry has appeared widely in journals and anthologies including Best Australian Poems, Meanjin, HEAT, Griffith Review and Island. She is the recipient of a Queensland Writers Fellowship, the Mick Dark Fellowship for Environmental Writing, and the Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. She lives in Brisbane.



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TEXT review

Worth taking the time

review by Paul Scully



Les Wicks

Time Taken: New & Selected

Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah NSW, 2022

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Time Taken, the New and Selected Poems of Les Wicks, marks a poetic golden anniversary and samples from some fourteen previous volumes. It is also a highlights reel in the way a Collected Poems is an autobiography. More than these, though, it is a reminder of how pungent, street-smart and inventive his reflections are on the life he has lived and the lives that have milled around him. He is sometimes so whip-smart that he risks but mostly avoids trailing into the smart-arsery of a less empathic writer.

The book is organised thematically, which themes range from the impecuniousness and moods of youth and a penchant for protest (“Hungry” and “Angry”), people he has known or come across and relationships, loves and emotions (“Friends” and “Touched”), to events and episodes that the poet has found especially curious (“Puzzled”), with that word’s fullest range

of meaning, and a less desperate maturity (“Peace”), and across aspects of place (“Landed” and “Water Ways”), each with its own aphorism, e.g. “One can find truth in a bottle,/ but the light’s a bit distorted” (p. 11) for the “Hungry” chapter.

These titles struggle to capture, however, the cast of characters that wanders through the pages – Wicks savours our foibles and takes delight in skewering them, but also cultivates an unromantic fondness for those doing it tough or on the wrong side of a heartless officialdom, as in the poor fellow with mental health problems in “The Hinge” that a young station attendant is forced to refer on to the police and who is sat in “a stalwart vinyl chair at the security office. The police/ smashed his head/ into an efficiently grey desk” (p. 19), which leads the poet to conclude that “all our days are numbered/ moral failures impotent vicinities” (p. 20). A concern for fairness and/or justice is almost always the sub-text to such episodes; sometimes this concern surges savagely to the fore, as in “Chain each man of power to weathered wooden benches,/ until the infusion of birdcall subdues their hands” (p. 235) in “Beside the Road to War”. Wicks is particularly aware of the potential duplicity that resides within institutions that are meant or profess to act in our interests – “Walls protect & imprison concurrently” (“The Compound”, p. 27).

Travel also arcs through the collection, be the locations, one assumes, the product of a young Australian’s rite of passage to the old colonial parent (“*Maybe It’s Because I’m a Londoner*”), poetry festivals (“Chengdu – After the Festival”), journeys across Australia (“Fremantle”) or excursions into the bush (“Jerusalem Track”). The first of these poems is an of-the-moment riff on squats, fractured lives and struggling artistry in the prose poem format, the second a contrast between the forced modernity of a modern Chinese city and the denizens of its backstreets where a street sweeper, for example, “sleeps in the amnesty of shade” (p. 147), the third a growl against a gentrified harbour town that exploits and ignores its history at the same time, and the last a new poem and reflection on a landscape still smouldering after a bushfire – the resting poet, seeing both a young man assiduously scaling a slope and an “aged man” caught in thought behind him, concludes:

So we too are seasons.

We too are smoke. Free & inevitable. (“Jerusalem Track”, p. 119)

If there is a unifying element to the collection beyond the pistol shot of Wicks’ imagery and his cut-through language, it is a fascination with and ability to detect and parse the ambiguities, paradoxes, bivalences, co-existent contraries, call them what you will, that abound or so easily avail or suggest themselves in our world. He addresses this directly when he asks, in “Requiem for a Squid”, “Does each moment carry/ these opposing aspects?” (p.107). Other less direct examples include:

Her tan linen placidity will not be shaken (“Colour & Movement”, p. 69)

... this
city with its polished shells, the driftwood
desolation that is a kind of sensuality (“The Sydney Problem”, p. 155)

A granite breakwater, that construct built on collapse
is the human pretence of permanence (“Belief Beach”, p. 188)

Prudence is sedition (“The Table”, p. 201)

There is verbal play at work in such instances but also combinations of simple observer and satirist, social commentator and societal participant, idealist and realist as the situation requires.

This volume is both an accomplishment and an entertainment and, like all good provocations, prompts you to examine your own views. I imagine someone saying what Wicks writes of another poet, “His last word was *poetry*” (“The Bed”, p. 112), though I hope such a time is far off into the future and know there is plenty of poetry left in him.

Paul Scully is a Sydney-based poet with three published collections, the latest being The Fickle Pendulum, published by Interactive Press in 2022. His work has been commended and shortlisted in major Australian poetry prizes and published in print and online journals in Australia, Ireland, the UK and USA (<http://paulscullypoet.com.au/>).



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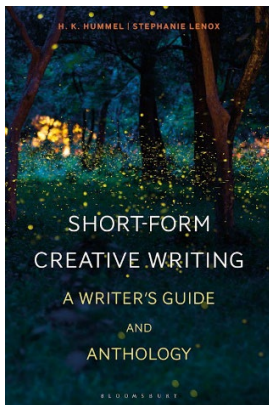
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TEXT review

The long half-life of short-form writing

review by Moya Costello



H. K. Hummel and Stephanie Lenox

Short-form Creative Writing: A Writer's Guide and Anthology

Bloomsbury, London, 2022 (first published 2018)

ISBN 9781350019881

Pb 368pp AUD52.99

Originally published in 2018, the recent reprint of *Short-form Creative Writing: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* continues its relevance, especially considering that short forms are a current feature of the publishing/creative-writing zeitgeist. Evidential is the number of international literary journals and awards calling for flash fiction, for example the Bath Flash Fiction Award; nationally, Sydney-based publisher Spineless Wonders is exclusively devoted to short forms, in multiple media; plus the existence of a number of textbooks devoted to the short form, including *The Prose Poem: An Introduction* by Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton (Princeton University Press 2020), and this book under review, into its fourth reprint in response to demand/need.

If you are thinking about the short story as a short form – say, anything from 2000 to 4000 (gosh, word counts are getting so problematic) – this is possibly not the textbook for you. *Short-form Creative Writing* concentrates on works under 1000 words. *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders is possibly the textbook for short-story writers/teachers. Not that long ago, one writer I was in conversation with, about their latest release of a short story collection, turned up their nose at the idea of flash or micro fiction. But Penelope Russon wrote in *TEXT* that “the short-short story is its own rarefied skill” (2021, p. 1).

Short-form Creative Writing is suitable for both the teacher of writing and the practicing writer who can, given the book’s accessible structure, guide themselves, since the book provides what one might think of as the necessities, like Maslow’s theory of needs, but for writing: history, theory, exercises and exemplars.

The history details the longevity of short forms such as maxims and riddles that have “thrived alongside longer forms ... and have roots in the oral tradition” (p. 8). The theory is based in “flash interviews” with writers in the “Anthology”. “Free dives” initiate a deep immersion in writing; an example is to attend to memory and write on the images generated (p. 29). “Exercises” are designed to ignite critical thinking; an example is to discuss writing and sending a postcard to yourself to reflect on the outcome, given time-delay (p. 82). “Prompts” generate writing; an example is to use the recurring phrase “There was the time” in sentences and paragraphs (p. 138). “One-sentence workshops” require absolute brevity, an example being to use parenthetical asides to imply cause and effect (p. 189).

The exemplars are short-form writing “produced by writers from Bosnia, Canada, Chile, France, Greece, Iceland, Italy, the United States, and beyond” (p. xix). Writers include Semezdin Mehmedinović, Pía Barros, Charles Baudelaire, Thomas Tsalapatis, Italo Calvino, Lydia Davis. Hummel and Lenox also generously share their own explorations of the form, taking turns to respond to the “free dives”. “As teachers we often write alongside our students in the classroom ... We’re not just talking at you: we’re immersed in the process of experimentation with you” (pp. xx-xxi).

Short-form Creative Writing has traditional chapters like “Voice, Character, and Narrator”, but also pursues, as in its chapter “Beg, Borrow, and Steal”, the Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith senses of conceptual and uncreative writing that are a type of intertextuality, and entail strategies such as using the list, prayer, letter and more – that is, the “hermit crab” strategy, the naming only recently having come to my attention: short-form writing creeping into another carapace. Short-short writing as a form itself first came to my attention in 1987, when James Thomas and Robert Shapard edited a collection *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*. Hummel and Lenox say that Thomas and Shapard had noticed in their reading “works of fiction totalling no more than a few pages ... that seemed to position themselves between ... fiction and poetry” (p. 13).

Among the many challenges of teaching creative writing is keeping up with theory, writers, publications, publishers, fashion. If you are thinking of creative writing students as needing to

earn an income or gain recognition in their profession, surely short forms are a necessary component of the syllabus even though the income is as small as the form in which they are writing. In the “Acknowledgements” and “Author Bios” in *Short-form Creative Writing*, student writers can check what journals publish such forms and what publishers have accepted collections.

In their ‘Introduction’, Hummel and Lenox have a chapter “A note on genre”. They “use ‘short form’ to deliberately resist categorizing texts by genre” (p. 12), because “the boundaries are blurry” and they like “to encourage a ... healthy skepticism when it comes to identifying genre categories” (pp. 11-12). Notably, when Spineless Wonders first started publishing anthologies around 2012, they subtitled them “an anthology of prose poems and microfiction”; around 2019, they switched to, more simply but inclusively, “an anthology of microlit”.

Some of the short-form exemplars used in *Short-form Creative Writing* are prose poems as listed by Hummel and Lenox in the “Genre index” (pp. 326-327); unsurprisingly, the majority are named as flash fiction, but there is also flash nonfiction, essay, paragraph, short story, lecture. Hummel and Lenox also display a “Chart of short-form terms” which includes micro stories, nanofiction and vignettes (p. 12).

Short-form Creative Writing provides a safety net, a comfort zone, for writers submitting in this genre, giving sustenance against those publishers’ guidelines that will not accept novellas, let alone a collection of flash fiction or a novel-in-flash.

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Moya Costello is Adjunct Lecturer, Southern Cross University where she taught writing for nine years. She has five books: two collections of short creative prose, two short novels, and one collection of prose poems (Highly Commended in the 2022 Anne Elder Award). She has many scholarly and creative articles in textbooks, anthologies, journals and art catalogues; read at many venues; and judged many writing competitions. She has microlit in eight Spineless Wonders anthologies. W moyacostello.com/ T @moya_costello I moyacostello_writer F https://www.facebook.com/MoyaCostelloWriter.