

## To You—The Reader: *Thea Astley: Selected Poems*

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Growing up in an Australian country town, one might think that Australian literature would be a key staple in the school syllabus. Sadly, this was not my experience, and it has been a shortcoming that I have only come to appreciate the extent of while at university. My forays into the tradition of great Australian literature constantly and pleasantly surprise me, and one recent discovery has been the work of Thea Astley. Astley was certainly a prolific novelist—having written fifteen books over the course of her career—but more importantly, she was an *accomplished* writer; a fact often overlooked despite her impressive collection of literary honours. Although she had been writing from the early 1960s until well into the late 1990s, my education up until now had provided me with scant opportunity to encounter this heavyweight of Australian literature. Before coming across *Selected Poems*, edited by Cheryl Taylor and introduced by Susan Wyndham, the name Thea Astley had sparked only the vaguest of recollections in my mind.

Many of those fortunate enough to be familiar with Astley know her primarily for her award-winning prose writing as both a novelist and short-story writer, but she was also a poet, and this collection brings together a selection that includes never-before-published works. Her literary career spanned more than four decades and, as mentioned by Susan Wyndham in her glowing introduction to this collection, she has won with her body of work more Miles Franklin awards than any other Australian to date. At a time when women faced significant hurdles to entering the Australian literary scene, Astley was not only reliably published, but also recognized as one of the doyens of Australian literary fiction. Impressively, she achieved this feat while balancing her writing career with her work as a teacher and the responsibilities expected of a wife and mother in mid-twentieth-century Australia.

When confronted with anthologies of such scope as *Selected Poems*, I have often found myself the victim of a temptation to browse my way through in search of the handful of poems that demand my attention and capture my interest. I found such literary cherry picking an impossibility in the case of this collection of Thea Astley's verse. The sequence of the works enlivens the poems, and the thought placed into the curation of this collection is undeniable. I found myself drawn into the maelstrom of Astley's life, from her childhood in a Catholic school, through the trials of wartime Brisbane, and into the dazzling brilliance of the Australian environment. Wyndham introduces each section of the anthology, and her insights stitch together the works into a single narrative experience, making it impossible to pull away from the collective flow of Astley's poems. Open to a page in Astley's *School Years*, for instance,

and find "Dreaming" and "Unrest" placed side-by-side, poems of peace and turmoil brought together to richly depict the state of Astley's teenage mind.

Someone once told me that poetry occurs in the dialogue between *epistêmê* and *technê*—between knowledge and craft—and it is an insight that struck me while reading this collection. Astley makes bedfellows of Apollo and Dionysus, and beauty and passion flourish in the rich depictions of the Australian outback found in her verse. This is not like the poetry that I remember from school. Astley provides no confounding lines about the English countryside that my younger self would have found as appealing as a migraine. She describes an Australia that I could immediately relate to, unlike the parochial sketches of Paterson or Lawson, which at times have felt as distant to me as an English country garden. She suggests a living Australian environment rather than one relegated to the past. At the same time, Astley challenges quaint constructions of beauty by giving voice to the experiences of a young woman growing up in an environment known for its harshness as well as its magnificence.

From "Enchantment" to "Magnetic," Astley smoothly transitions between writing styles, languages, and themes. I found myself swept into a whirlwind of profound love, devastating heartbreak, overwhelming loss, inevitable change, crushing guilt, striking Australian nature, and childhood innocence. The structure of Astley's verse does have a looseness that may not satisfy those looking for the rigidly structured vision of Australia found in the ballads of the bush poets. However, I found this to be a kind Australian poetry previously unknown to me, and it was the looseness that made it relatable in a way I had never found the staples of school curriculum to be. This great strength of Astley's verse—its closeness to the lived experience of rural Australia—at times struck a little too close to home. Astley explores her themes so well, and so thoroughly that, while it was impossible not to be moved, after more than one hundred poems I developed a sense of retracing familiar ground. For some this might make Astley's work a reliable work to return to, but I found myself weary by journey's end. Nevertheless, Astley's jaw-dropping vocabulary and ceaseless creativity demonstrate that her mastery of language extends beyond her lauded prose.

In her introduction, Susan Wyndham celebrates Astley's knack for finding *le mot juste*, and it was only upon reaching the end of the collection that I truly appreciated her sentiment. Reading Astley's poetry is not like observing her written account of life in the latter half of the twentieth century in rural and regional Australia; it is experiencing the tumult of love, passion, grief and loss. Engaging with Astley's work is entering a liquid reflection of herself, from childhood through to adolescence and self-discovery. "Creation" marks a burgeoning adulthood. "Absent," a woman separated from her husband by war. The highest commendation I can give this collection is that while poetry holds only occasional relish for me, Astley has forced me to reassess my assumptions about what Australian poetry can mean.

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