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MAUREEN FREER'S TEALEAF ORACLES

Maureen Freer. *Tealeaf Oracles*. Brisbane: Boolarong Press, 1982. Limp bound: \$6.95. 68 pp.

Australian poetry publishing has settled down considerably since the mid-seventies muddle, but there is still no guarantee that the best books will appear with the best known publishers. A case in point is Maureen Freer's first book *Tealeaf Oracles*, which has brought her at a bound into the middle rank of Australian women poets.

Tealeaf Oracles has some of the usual faults of a first and largely self-edited book. There are some awkward gestures, several poems that need ruthless pruning, and some lines with odd inversions and dated rhythms. But though her opening poem confesses to a terminal case of "*Verses scribendi*/the deadliest malady/under the sun," the overall impression is one of intelligent creation. If the six children and various business interests mentioned on the cover have delayed Ms Freer's first book of verse, they have largely assured its maturity.

She has a variety of styles. Sometimes a little like Bruce Dawe as in this piece on a religious apparition:

The commercial media
hardened by 40-second apparitions
Mr Sheen walking on the furniture
Trix on the water
Retravisions
all those fabulous lemons popping
in supermarkets, the miraculous
cleansing, not to mention
out-of-this-world electrifying performances
by AC/DC, Elton John and Slade –
dismissed it as an unconfirmed sighting.

Sometimes more epigrammatic as in the conclusion of "Failed Poet":

By day, six children
devoured her, throttled
her with love. Laid
a thousand poesies on her
till she was dead.

or this narrative, with its cheeky line-endings:

... Forty-two in February
the meterman entered her
apartment looking for
faults and found none.

In the same mode she has a reference to a local creek whose name might deserve to pass into Australian folklore:

... the Mingimarny, meanest creek
ever to flood or stubbornly run dry.

But Freer's is not essentially a poetry of highlights. What her poems are most remarkable for is the refreshing quality of good hostship. They draw the reader in, easily and naturally, without false moments or unnecessary ceremony. There are no brambles of obscurity or of authorial ego and pretence to be struggled through:

... "They're racing!" And they are, past the straight six,
thudding and heaving, handwhipped to perfection,
into the final corridor of splendour
trapped like motes within the shuttered eye
of the camera-god. Our voices thunder,
"HYPERNO FIRST!" But where is Dulcify?

It's always like this. Always we kill our heroes –
Phar Lap and Chifley, Holt Lyons and Curtin –
slay with indifference each straining champion,
put down the horse that falters, should have won.

This may not be a great poem (if you object to a slight prolixity in the concluding lines) but it is an eminently readable one. You don't have to strain and squint to follow the poet's thought.

If only the majority of Australian poets wrote as accessibly as this, the readership of a book of verse might be in the tens of thousands instead of the low thousands. We have some fine poets whose work compels an unwilling approval; you read their books with admiration and with a decreasing appetite for poetry. Whereas when you read a piece like the one above, increase of appetite may grow by what it feeds on.

Freer's imagery is not often startling, but it is usually right. For instance, on an old farmer moved to the city:

1980. We visit Grandad, tethered
like a restless horse at the Veterans' Retreat
to a metal handrail overlooking Brisbane.
He lights his pipe, asks news, examines the sky
for signs of rain, gradually unwinds
tales *like strands from an old weathered rope.*

The two most impressive poems in this collection are longer pieces drawing on specifically female experience. One is the epistolary "*Letters For a Missing Daughter*" in which the daughter's replies are printed in bold type:

Whoever mentioned marriage? Silly question.
None of your business really, anyway.
Living (just)
mainly on cheese and olives.
Money running out, and H. is leaving.
Think I'll go to India via turkey
(Marmaris), perhaps end up in prison
(joke). Hope to be home some day.

The other is the misleadingly-titled "Apology For Unborn Children" – in fact more like a month-by-month chronicle of responses to an unplanned pregnancy. It is a poem that will more than sustain comparison with Bruce Dawe's recent anti-abortion piece. In fact, unless you're a dedicated anti-abortioneer, Dawe's poem is liable to irritate with its masculine polemic, its human-chauvinism, and its indifference to the obvious practical and ecological reasons for not letting unwanted conceptions turn into babies. By contrast Freer reaches her pro-baby conclusion via experience:

Dumbly I hold the child I did not want,
the threat-of-child made flesh of my own flesh
against the urgent breast ungrudging now.
Somewhere within a mind's dim puzzled groping
flickers brief cognizance of a plan —
body to bones, bones to dust, dust into flower
sprouting from some vast eternal tree.
My own loved child, this much I only know:
I am the spent leaf wintering on the bough;
you are the bud that opens as I fall.

Welcome, sweet stranger, to a stranger world.

Maureen Freer is definitely a poet to watch.