

winning film *An Angel at my Table*, based on all three autobiographical fictions, which enjoyed an unanticipated success first as a telefilm, then in mainstream Australian cinemas a few years ago. As Mercer notes, it is ironic that the film, "more than anything else, has influenced the reading and popularity of Janet Frame" (223). More accessible than Frame's other major works of fiction, these "found fictions" as she calls them, which however for her are "just conservative narration from beginning to end" (quoted 224), also become part of the current appetite for life writing. Here, readers are offered an apparently "simple, everyday glass" that allows us a space from which to identify with the often tragic events of Frame's life, always protected by the safety of our own sameness.

This is a valuable work both for Frame devotees as well as for new readers of her work. It will also engage those interested in the ways the positions and the functions of reader/writer, author/critic may conjoin and the ways these two modes of writing and of thinking can be made intersubjective instead of divided from one another. Then critical apparatuses and practices can enhance rather than diminish the fictions that are the object of their attention. In a chapter on *Living in the Maniototo* (1979), which Mercer constructs as a dialogue between two kinds of discourse, which are perhaps dream, perhaps reality, she effects a transformation of more conventional critical practices. Her fiction is of two critics, one entering,

caught up in and negotiating the apparently perverse maze of the novel; the second delivering a properly structured and pedantic academic paper on it. It offers a witty, playful representation of the shifting possibilities of the "many folds" of Frame's duplicitous, wise and wonderful fictions as well as of the many frustrations and foibles of traditional criticism for writers. This is a fine and itself occasionally fantastical book on Janet Frame's extraordinary output.

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Gina Mercer

THE DAYS OF LOVE ARE LETTERED

Jennifer Strauss, ed, *The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, 294 pp. RRP \$29.95 ISBN 0 19 553297 X

Dear Maria,

Was great talking to you the other night, though I was sad to hear you so upset. Thirteen year olds are an awful challenge, aren't they? It must have been such a shock, when Leigh has known about your relationship with Mona for so long, that she should suddenly become furious about it. Do you think someone at school said "Ya, your mum's a lezzo" or something and that set her off? Though as we've often said in our late night discussions

about being mothers, if we could understand what made children tick, winning the Nobel Prize in any field would be a doddle. Have things settled down now? Is she talking to you again? You said at the end of the call that when I wrote I should tell you about what I've been doing, as an antidote to your chaos. O.K. try this for an antidote. I've stayed at home the last couple of days to read love poetry! No — the subject does not tell you anything gossip-worthy about my personal life — sorry! I could legitimately claim that it was work, it was love poetry published by Oxford University Press, how much more legitimate can you get? Although it was pure work, it inevitably made me think about the personal since you can't get much more personal than "love", can you? So in some ways it was very satisfying work because, as you know, I like breaking down the false separation between the personal and the public, and it allowed me to do just that, without anxiety!

Maybe my interest in the personal/public debate explains why I was asked to write this review. I have wondered. I mean, as a woman living in a long-running monogamous relationship, I couldn't really be expected to be an "expert" on love poetry, could I? For starters, it strikes me that love poetry is not something that women have traditionally written. Secondly love poetry, or any other kind of poetry for that matter, doesn't figure much in my conversations with Mo. We talk about childcare, vegetable gardens, politics at work, white-ants,

parenting, taxation, contraception, or we play the "who is the tiredest of them all" game (I know you know it), but love poetry — never. Cynically (or is it realistically?) I've always thought of love poetry as something that pot-bellied men used in order to seduce romantically-inclined young women, you know, those thin-legged men who hope that poetic proof of sensitivity will outweigh a need for proof of physical bearability? Bitter experience is peeping through here! And then there were all those Elizabethan love sonnets we studied together at uni, remember? They read like anatomical catalogues — full of lips, eyes, breasts and sometimes even thighs, with never a brain, nerve, piece of connective tissue, let alone a gender analysis of power, between them? All in all, though it did sound wonderful to read love poetry for work, I approached it without much energy, as a duty, not expecting a great deal of pleasure. But, you'll be pleased to hear that Jenny Strauss and her selection of Australian love poetry really challenged my preconceptions and cynicisms. And I don't mean challenged in the euphemistic way that I used it earlier, but in its most positive sense. Reading this anthology made me realise a few connections I hadn't considered before — there were some unexpected (and therefore very pleasurable) pleasures to be had in the reading of this collocation of love poems.

It would be hard to say that I found a favourite poem in here, because they were so diverse, but one which I *am* going to share with Mo, some day

when we've got rid of the white-ants,
is Jenny Strauss' own "What Women
Want" which ends:

Perhaps separation's essential,
like sleep, or like sex,
but women want
sometimes still to lie
truly together
a whole afternoon
awake, without wanting.

This was one poem which aroused me as instantly as a lover's hand on the inner thigh. My pulse responded with the recognition of shared desire — now I want to work out a way of sending it to Freud. Is it a "love poem"? Well, I guess not in the conventional sense, but it certainly evokes what a lot of women love doing with their lovers. Or is it altogether too passive for your taste? I know I mustn't get too essentialist about this desire which Strauss and I happen to share, maybe a lot of women would hate "to lie with a lover/ a whole afternoon/ so close that the skin/ knows boundaries only by knowing contact/ and the mind surrenders/ managerial fuss". But all I can say is, what bliss!

Still, if I couldn't be doing that, I'd probably be at some political meeting bristling with "managerial fuss", which is why I really enjoyed Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal's "My Love." In it she challenges a lover who wants to "claim [her] as [his] very own" when she has long since decided that she's "wedded to a cause" and lives a "dedicated life,/ No man's

to have and hold." Not quite what Wyatt or Wordsworth would have regarded as "love poetry," eh? Not quite the kind of sentiment they or Rousseau would have expected to find nestling in the "fruit-like" breast of the "dusky maiden" construct in colonialist "love poetry" of their respective eras, is it? And that is one of the most interesting and multifaceted aspects of this anthology — the definition of love poetry. As any good editor should, Strauss spells out her "selection criteria" in the introduction. She writes that the "anthology ... took as its particular focus those attachments between adults which are, or have been, sexually charged"(xxi). When I read this, I must confess I felt disappointed. I figured that we'd really been saturated by literature on this topic and that it would be more innovative to look at other forms of (not necessarily sexual) love, like that which hums away between cats and their carers; parents and children; aunts and nieces; work colleagues; a garden and its gardener; activist friends; and any of the other loving relationships which shape our lives when the "sexual charge" seems simply too expensive, or too much like a job for a toreador. I could understand Strauss' feeling that the approach I'd hoped for, which she says she considered, would be "too diffuse," perhaps even unmanageable ... though I'd still like to see someone try ... what about you, when Leigh leaves home? That would be a project capable of vanquishing any empty nest syndrome, now wouldn't it? But to get back to Strauss and what she

does and doesn't do about defining love poetry. Well, to my immense relief I think she contradicts her own guidelines, or if I can extend her personification, the anthology took this particular definition and stretched it pretty extensively, in a way which immensely enhanced the anthology's own interest in being interesting.

Take Oodgeroo's poem for example, it's not really a poem about sexual charge, past or present. Rather it's a poem which rejects possessive sexual charges in favour of the more rewarding and enduring charge of ideological commitment. And I know you'd rather go to a feminist collective meeting than hang out in a nightclub any day, wouldn't you? At the former, the emotional and intellectual charge, as well as a certain kind of love, is sure and satisfying, at the latter the search for sexual charge is risky to both body and self-esteem — and in my experience, very far from being guaranteed. I know that this preference will sound utterly daggy to the romantics and sexual libertarians, but perhaps that's exactly why I liked this poem so much. Maybe I'm digressing a little, except that this is the kind of issue Strauss made me consider, through her selection of poems about love: about love rejected (Oodgeroo), love loathed (Ada Cambridge), love omitted (Bobbi Sykes), love on its death-bed (Elizabeth Riddell), love enjoyed (Donna McSkimming), love redefined (Lee Cataldi), love of writing about love (Dorothy Auchterlonie),

love resisted (Barbara Giles), love continuing over years and children (Gwen Harwood), love destroyed by rape (IIO), war (Laurence Collinson) or racism (Mudrooroo) ... do you see what I mean by the pliancy of Strauss' neat editor-correct definition? I suddenly begin to imagine that she wrote the introduction sitting at her desk in twin-set and pearls, her feet constricted by court shoes — but that the selection took place at home with her lying on a large beautifully-lined bed bestrewn by a cat and the poems, the anthologist's limbs clad in a comfortable though sensuous wrap, able to relax and enjoy the depth and variety of the material at hand, sprawling well away from tidy definitions. Maybe, maybe — see what a suggestive book it turns out to be?

The other issue I've been pondering as I lay on my bed in a sarong (yes, it's hot here already) reading this anthology, has been the question of who reads love poetry these days? Even the would-be Don Juan, unless he only targeted young women with an English major, would be taking a big risk in utilising love poetry in his arsenal of seduction strategies. Imagine Leigh's sophisticated denigration of any male who ventured such an approach with her? 'Twould be wonderful to see! Is it something you and Mona do together on a Saturday afternoon? If so you haven't mentioned it! Strauss has included a number of lesbian poems here, and it won't surprise you to find that they were amongst the most enjoyable for

me. I wish I still had friends to whom I could introduce Lesbia Harford's work, she's so direct and potent. Strauss notes in her introduction that it was easier to find lesbian love poems than gay male ones. I'm glad she managed to find the one's she did, especially Tony Page's rewrite of Romeo — as a randy fifteen year old reluctantly wooing Juliet after a night of passion with his older male lover! Wonder if Strauss' difficulties in finding such works arise from gender constructions, or perceptions of homophobia, or even a particular brand of homophobia in operation in the publishing world, or simply where Strauss was able to look? If she had to wash all those sheets and feed the cat as well as handwash the twin-set, her search for gay male poetry couldn't have been utterly exhaustive, now could it? It would be interesting to know if there are charges from the gay male community that she "didn't look hard enough", or if there simply hasn't been very much love poetry written by gay men? Could be a thesis in that?

There would be another very interesting thesis or two on love and aging as depicted in Australian poetry with some fascinating samples in this anthology from Peter Porter, Tom Shapcott and Judith Rodriguez. The last two (not surprisingly), celebrate the love affairs of the over-forties while Porter disparages mightily, suggesting that would-be-lovers in that age bracket should stick to "paperbacks" and "pictures". And of course the end result of straight sex, if you're

not very careful, is pregnancy, which doesn't discriminate about whether you're forty or not. As it's always a fairly dramatic and emotional event, I was pleased to find that Strauss included a number of poems in which lovers contemplate the pregnant state. I enjoyed reading poets like Kenneth Mackenzie, David Campbell, Judith Wright and Alison Croggon expressing intriguing and diverse reactions to the concept of generation. Another thesis perhaps? What all these suggested study topics point to (apart from my position in, and subsequent obsession with, academia) is a rather sorrowful forecasting that the most likely market for this book is as a set text on university Australian Literature courses. The notion of a "set text" always puts me in mind of boarding-school jelly — there seems little possibility that it will be either nourishing or sensuous to those who have to consume it. And this seems a rather sad fate for Strauss' lively, moving and thought-provoking book. I wouldn't suggest that you buy this anthology for Mona if you're hoping to inspire her with romantic or even erotic thoughts, it contains too much evidence of the love-gone-wrong scenario. The cost of love rather than the "sexual charge", if you like! I guess I would think about putting it on my Australian Literature course, hoping to present it as a fabulously multi-layered port-wine trifle rather than as a set jelly. Remember we had some success that way with the *Anthology of Eighteenth Century Women Poets* which you suggested I introduce a couple of

years ago, and which the students repeatedly name as one of their favourites?

Many more years ago, do you remember, we were sitting around drinking white wine and discussing the art of pleasuring ourselves? Judy said that she enjoyed doing it, but kept forgetting to because she was too busy and tired. You and I nearly choked laughing at this, which probably had more to do with the amount we'd drunk than what she'd said. But when I was reading this anthology, I was suddenly reminded of that incident. Seems to me that we've all become so inanely busy and tired that we do forget to give ourselves little pleasures, like reading a love poem while we wait for the kettle to boil, or meditating on a couple just before we go to sleep. In fact I could do a lot worse than buy us a couple of copies, so that we can share a little long-distance pleasure together — can't think of a better antidote to chaos, can you? Or is it an antidote? Isn't it more of a connection than an opposition, because so much of our emotional chaos has to do with love? You and Leigh and Mona for example? Anyway, be on the watch for a "parcel of love" in the mail next week. You never know, even Leigh might find something in it to challenge her rage, or channel her hormones! And I'm hoping that Jenny Strauss can buy herself a new silk wrap on the royalties from this anthology because I'm certain she must have read a lot of purple nylon drip-dry love poetry in order to come up with this ream of tough and silken

material. I know you'll really revel in its multifarious revelations — as always it comes

with love from Gina