

Carolyn Gerrish, in her latest collection, *Hijacked to the Underworld*, seems to be a woman caught in some kind of hiatus, stuck between one part of her life and the next. "this chapter of my life/ is finished/ & i'm still/ living in it," she says in "Crisis Dreaming." In the poem "Tenebrae" she worries about "this dearth of pathos a mid-life autism."

In this collection, Gerrish concerns herself with those things that she has already lost, and others that she will possibly never have. She is unsparring in her analysis of the superficial, though at times there is a tiny glimmer of envy when she turns her attention on superficial people. "I sit on the side. here." she says in "At the Movies" and "if you sit in front of me ... I disappear."

In Gerrish's poems I found a refreshing contrast to the popular, simpering reverence for every possible misconceived sentimentality. At times I was almost moved to utter the now-famous words: You're terrible, Muriel! Reading the back cover of the book I discovered, to my surprise, no mention of Gerrish's wicked humour and irreverence. "But you wonder (as we are caught in the updraught)/ is it safe to live without gravity?"

Gerrish picks the bones of her relationships with her parents and the sorry process of aging. She exposes the vulnerabilities of her own loves, lusts and losses, and lets

herself remain exposed while waiting for her new life to put in an appearance. "time to come out of exile/ return to the tribe or/ form one of your own." The title of the book, itself, may give us a clue to the author's progress into this unknown future. There was once an oracle built in Boeotia and dedicated to Trophonius. Any questioner underwent a complex initiation, was dressed as a sacrificial victim carrying a honey-cake, and descended into a pothole. An underground stream swept her along some distance before she was returned to the light, having heard invisible speakers in the cavern. I can't help wondering what Gerrish's first words might be, on her return to the Aboveworld: "you arrive home, terminally damp/ Trusting your distrust of the world."

Diane Menghetti

UNTIRING WOMEN

Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999. pp.394 + x, illus. \$45.00 ISBN 0 522 84847 8

"Comrades," Jean Devanny informed a Waterside Workers Federation meeting during the 1930s, "in the

Soviet Union sexual intercourse is wonderful!" (129) While hoping that I will not be accused of trivialising Carole Ferrier's exhaustive and intuitive biography of this "romantic revolutionary," I find this a very telling quote. It shows us a Devanny who is remarkably like a character in one of her own novels. She is clever, thoughtful and analytical, but sometimes simplistic to the point of naivete. She can be forceful, even strident, while allowing herself to be used and abused to the point of oppression. Right to the end of her life (in Townsville in 1962) she was widely admired and emulated, while attracting sneers and sniggers from her detractors, and ambivalence from even her friends and relatives.

Carole Ferrier has spent more than twenty years amassing and making sense of documents, oral testimonies, and books that shed light on Devanny's life, and professes herself still not "tired of her." (320) Nearly four hundred pages of text did not tire me either. In part, at least, this is because Devanny's career illustrates so many of the contradictions that enmeshed radical women during the first half of the twentieth century. She remains problematic. What might this talented novelist have written had she not committed so much of her life and health to the Communist Party? Or, for that matter, would her political career have matured and flourished if she had not been a writer? Might her

human relationships have developed and warmed in the absence of the intense self-preoccupation that these activities entailed?

Jean Devanny was born in New Zealand in 1894. Her maternal family elicits comparisons with that of DH Lawrence. She married a coal miner when she was nineteen and had three children by the time she was twenty-one. After a brief flirtation with music, she published her first novel, *The Butcher Shop*, in 1926, by which time her career of political activism was well and truly launched. The Devanny family moved to Australia at the height of the Depression and, apart from a visit to Berlin and the Soviet Union in 1931, Jean lived in this country for the rest of her life. Much of that time was spent in north Queensland, her last home (and her first house) being in Castling Street, Townsville.

From the mid-1920s, Devanny's two passions, literature and politics, competed for her attention. It was a competition she tried hard to resolve. Most of her novels are polemic. Their theme is the struggle and eventual triumph of industrial and sexual radicalism. That she did not succeed in the revolution was due to the authoritarianism and intellectual limitations of the bureaucracy of the Communist Party of Australia at this time. Devanny's driving energy and brilliance as a public speaker were used and abused until her health collapsed and her reading public fell away. Then, with her career in tatters

and her reputation sullied by the Party's inability to come to terms with her sexual politics, she was abandoned to poor health and extreme poverty.

The biography might have read as tragedy, but it does not. Rather, it echoes the themes of Devanny's novels. She believed firmly that a socialist novel must not just state the problems of the oppressed – it must offer solutions and hope for a better future. Ferrier's autobiography does just that. The success of the book comes from her sensitive and scholarly reconstruction of the context of Devanny's political and literary achievements. Her portrayal of the CPA is masterly. While never blind to the frequent absurdities of "the line" and the cruelties that resulted from a constant and authoritarian focus on "the big picture," she is always aware of the optimism, humanity and hope that drove the "struggle for liberation." (320) The Party that held (to some extent and for some of the time at least) the loyalty of so many of Australia's leading writers and thinkers in those decades, had to have a personal and intellectual appeal that transcended its many shortcomings.

Ferrier is also very aware of the problems of biography: the problems of construction versus reconstruction; the need to choose between contradictory evidence. My own experience of oral testimony has suggested that the problems of

evidence become acute when relying on interviews with political activists who often have decades of experience in filtering communication. The task was certainly not helped by Devanny's own varying constructions of herself. These problems only add to the biographer's achievement. The result is a portrait that never shies away from her subject's blind spots, prejudices and insensitivities. On the other hand, Devanny's immense enthusiasm, her generosity and her unflagging will to change a flawed society shines through every page. This makes the book a joy to read as well as an essential text for anyone interested in the history, literature or politics of twentieth century Australia.

Mark O'Flynn

TAPPING THE DEEP WELL

Turning up the heat: New Poets Series Seven. Five Islands Press. ISBN 0 8 6418 713 0 \$27.50

Once again, Five Islands Press, the lone flagship for new Australian poetry, presents a powerful series of new voices as strong and coherent as those in previous years. It is refreshing to note, yet again, the thematic consistency and control