

effective as they are, they are not the heart of the work which, for me, is found in the more personal poems which are only by implication and extension political. Here there is frequently a concern with things passing and lost possibilities, with "the faces of the lives he might have lived." There is a mediating intelligence and a sense of paradox and irony as in the description of a lake that "glitters in the postcard like a blade," or another lake where "the mirror ripples into jaws / to grip the bloodied morning like a vice," or "Waiting. For whatever next / will come, drinking politely bitter tea," or of being in a narrow tunnel "baited with the promise / there's no escape from."

"Of the Stone" deserves the prominence the volume's title gives it. It's not very long but it's a big poem which moves from the specifics of:

the table vibrating under your arm
as the aeroplane takes off
or the train grinds past
or the solid earth crumbles to a fault

and builds and intensifies to symbolic generalisations:

of the night, of the parting,
of the need and the fear
the etched and printed book of loss
of the love that fails all understanding
of the stone that blocks the empty
tomb

It is a poem that is lyrical and unashamedly rhetorical in the best

sense, full of love for the world. It is the accumulation, if not the culmination, of many of the ideas, passions and pains to be found throughout the book.

I have a sense of how much I haven't said, how many poems haven't been mentioned, the lines of development undiscerned rather than of any bow I've tied around the work. Perhaps that leaves room for readers to sense and discover the poems one by one, discover their own favourites. One thing, I suspect they will discover is that, though this is mature work, there is no sense of complacency or self-satisfaction but rather a sense of urgency, a sense that, for Ron Pretty, poetry is still a provisional way of exploring and coming to terms with the world. That is some achievement.

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Cheryl Taylor

IMMERSED IN WARM REEF WATERS

Rosaleen Love, *Reefscape. Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*. Allen & Unwin, St Leonards N.S.W., 2000. ISBN 1 86448 873 5.

The Barrier Reef is a whole, yet immeasurably complex, phenomenon which transcends the categories often imposed on it as a basis for investigation and containment. By marshalling the mixed genres of travel-writing, poetic reflection, history and scientific reporting, and by challenging the boundaries which traditionally separate the sciences from spirituality and the arts, *Reefscape* honours the autonomy of its subject. As Love's title implies, the Reef is a compelling emblem of creative liminal freedom. Vertically it is poised between sea and sky, and horizontally between land and sea. It occupies sections of the line of descent between the Continental shelf and the deep ocean. Love reminds us that Indigenous cultures celebrate this indefinable marginal space in their paradoxical concept of "sea country." The author's experience as an academic, media commentator and widely-respected writer of science fiction short stories is the basis of her multifaceted approach.

When she travelled to North Queensland from the South and shaped her responses into literature, Rosaleen Love followed a pattern established by such notable women as Ellis Rowan, Dorothy Cottrell, Jean Devanny, Thea Astley and Janette Turner Hospital. In *Reefscape* she openly explores an affinity with Devanny, whose accounts of diving in a bell and helmeted suit in the early 1950s provide a sisterly

historical context for her own scuba diving lessons in 1998, at the age of fifty-eight. Both writers present their adventures unpretentiously and with an absorbing accuracy of observation. A measure of the honesty of *Reefscape* is the fact that the chapter, "Fishness," begins, not with the derring-do of independent observations on the Reef, but with the denizens of the Great Barrier Reef Aquarium in Townsville. Love generates an imaginative identification with fish of all species, and with dugongs, turtles, boobies, and noddy and sooty terns. She also evokes an intense, sensory appreciation for the reefscape structures of living coral, coral cays, sands and shallows. Her accounts range over Reef locations near and far, from Nymph Island to the Chesterfield Islands, Swains Reef, Green Island, Magnetic Island, and Princess Charlotte Bay.

Central to Love's prospectus is a quest for spiritual significance: "I wanted to explore why the reef ... inspires a sense of awe. Instead of the Tao of Physics, I'd go with the flow of reef waters" (12). She questions how "[t]he intense feeling of belonging to the broader community of life" characteristic of many religious traditions, might find a place in the "ecological-scientific mainstream" (13). The section entitled "Going with the Flow" evokes the aeons of time in which the world's reefs rose and fell, as a means for "imagining the tensions between ourselves and nature,

between what humans can control, and what controls us" (65).

On this foundation, Love formulates sensitive explanations of key political and conservationist issues affecting the Reef. She contrasts the colonial and early twentieth-century exploitation of trochus, pearl shell and *bêche-de-mer*, with the Indigenous sense of owning "sea country," and further with the European legal principle that the sea cannot be possessed. Love thinks herself sequentially into each of these perspectives, and generates sympathy for all of them. She finally aligns herself, however, with Jeremy Tager, of the North Queensland Conservation Council, who argues that the attempt to accommodate different user groups should give way to "the primary need to protect the reef" (98).

Love also considers the significance, for reefs and humans, of the depredations of the crown of thorns starfish, and of the unprecedented sequence of coral bleaching brought about in 1998-99 by global warming. Climate "hot spots" created a wave of warm waters, which swept around the world, and induced symbiotic algae and protective micro-organisms to desert their coral hosts. Love understands the bleaching of the Barrier and other reefs as a warning of profound changes coming soon to landscapes and species, including humanity. She nevertheless contextualises such possibilities within the flow of

universal transformation, of evolution and extinction over time on planet Earth.

Reefscape offers an individual viewpoint and some poetic profundities. Beyond this, its worth resides in its bringing together of scientific and historical research findings in an up-to-date, graceful synthesis, rather than in offering new insights or discoveries on its own behalf. The very breadth of reading behind the book at times imparts a documentary-like superficiality. The publishers appear to hope for readers from among the thousands of tourists who annually visit the Reef. As a guidebook which would also serve as a memento, *Reefscape* is a pleasant artifact, distinguished by an alluring cover design, colour photos from sources unrelated to Love's own travel, and appropriate typographical decorations. The style is colloquial and readable. However, inserted explanations, such as the encyclopaedia-like entry on Augustine of Hippo and the dubious locating of Charters Towers in Central Queensland, interrupt the flow and assume an under-informed readership. The frontispiece map is incomplete, jazzy and vague. Much of the material was apparently published beforehand as articles, and irritating repetitions have been allowed to remain. For example, the initials, GBRMPA, are explained three times. "Diving for Oldies," contains a full scientific account of the bends, but a subsequent history of Reef diving reiterates that the bends are

"caused by too rapid a change in pressure in the ascent" (85).

These, however, are comparatively minor reservations. It is true to say that I both enjoyed *Reefscape* and learned from it.

Rebecca Edwards

RUNNING UP THE FLAW

R.A. Simpson, *The Midday Clock; Selected Poems and Drawings*. The Age/Macmillan 1999

This is a beautifully produced book; clothbound, on thick, cream paper. Simpson's poems luxuriate in the centre of generous pages, interspersed with his brush-and-ink line drawings, mostly of female figures. It should be a delicious book, a book to savour and treasure. In his foreword, Andrew Clark of *The Age* writes: "A Poetry Editor of *The Age* for 28 years Ron fostered the work of numerous young practitioners ... His deep love of poetry, helpful disposition, unfailing courtesy—spiced at times with irreverent wit—created a literary oasis in a world where this literary form has too often been relegated to the bottom of the creative food chain." This is high praise. Although Clark's

metaphors are mixed, what he has to say makes me like R.A. Simpson very much. I don't, however, think much of his poetry.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe introduces these "dry, wise, historicist poems," and claims that "Simpson's artful pen runs up and down the flaw in creation." I agree that what Simpson has to say is drily witty, even wise. However, too often the lines themselves are flat and uninspiring. In "The Final Clubroom," for example:

Australian writers who have died
wait impatient in the final clubroom
to ask if they're read by those outside

They welcome you then say "So life is
over"

Even in more lyrical poems, such as "Down's Syndrome," there are line breaks which put unjustifiable pressure on certain words: *The stars are always there/ thinking serious/ between/ the sun going somewhere/ and when it comes back here*. Potentially strong images are betrayed by weak verbs, as in *At the edges grow/ today and tomorrow/ coming out like spider's legs* (Interior Restoration). "Grow" is fairly ordinary, but "coming out" is worse than ordinary. Surely the poet has a responsibility to his craft which includes finding verbs that carry the image he wishes to create, rather than dropping it flat on its back.

The drawings, like many of the poems, are unremarkable. Simpson's figures are for the most part faceless,