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POETRY—THE RUBIC'S CUBE OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Five Islands Press New Poets, Series 8

Wagtail poetry magazine, Issues 1 & 2, Picaro Press

Papertiger *New World Poetry* CDROM, Issue number 1

Just where is Australian poetry heading, how healthy is it and is it moving forward with fresh faces or simply repeating itself? I've been asked to look at these questions in relation to the three poetry publishing ventures described above.

Firstly, to the Five Islands Press New Poets Series. For many years this has been the only launching pad for the first collections of new Australian poets. Five Islands Press, under the editorship of poet Ron Pretty, has given many poets like BR Dioysius, Ted Nielsen, Michelle Taylor, Gina Mercer and others, that much-needed first shot at publication. But we must ask of the seven series to date, how many of these "new" poets have taken full advantage of Five Islands' stewardship and gone on to achieve in the higher realms of poetry? Regrettably few is the answer, I can only think of a handful.

This failure to develop will be true of most of the six poets in series 8, I fear. We must ask of these poems will they be with us in a year, two years, perhaps five or even ten years time? History has shown us few will last. There is little in these books or these poets that will go the distance and become the next Gwen Harwood or Robert Adamson. As a poetry reviewer I rarely see poets go much further than their first collections. There are few new discoveries like Anthony Lawrence—who from his first book showed an inventiveness, a newness, a startling mix of storytelling and image-bound clarity. There are many poets writing, a number getting published but few going the distance. But individually and as a group do these books augur well for the continuing survival of Australian poetry or are they simply proof that more poets are being published? To answer this question I want to look at the individual collections. In all these collections there are only a few poems that move from the page to the reader, only some portions or even lines of poems that command respect. Overall none of these works do enough, even as first books.

To look at the first collection in the New Poets Series 8, *Signs of Other Fires* by Cate Kennedy. At best there is a beautiful slowness to the work, an intensity

of description where the poet is holding open the scene like an open book.
In 'Welcome':

Memory
whether you knock on it, split it
eat it, can't bear to eat it
there it sits on your table
thump-ripe
already spoiling

I will not devour this
I cannot save this
I clasp my hands around its rind
a globe
pregnant with itself

the greengrocer raps his knuckles on a watermelon...

And from 'Chiquihuite':

I gulp in the unbreathed air, taste the thick hot purity of nothing.
I am the only thing out here not covered with spines
the only thing not baited, barbed and set into the air to wait
tussocks catch themselves like fishbones
a spine of hooks arch like hackles
how exhausted the ground is, worn away like a heel,
flinty knuckles of bone rub themselves through it,
an old wound, cauterised with heat.

Other memorable poems of Kennedy's include 'Burro' and certain lines from
'Offshore':

an old bloke with a chest barrelled like a dugong...
the hieroglyphics of salt...
there were fourteen hours a day without a shadow
and out on the boards long as war canoes
boys walked on water
they stayed up forever...
the persian-carpet roll of a sting-ray.

And there's the delightful line from 'There is this moment':

to hear the churchbell rinse the air.

But all too often the poems seem too long, well over their naturally germinated potential. Cate Kennedy has had a deal of success with short stories hence perhaps her preference for longer poetry.

In *Buoy* Terry Jaensch gives us poetry that in many cases works well on the page but we feel the need for some pieces to be read aloud, to be performed. For the most part this is tightly-cut poetry with flashes of literary quality and specks of emotion. It is in poems like 'Invalid' that the poet exercises most skill:

Changing the sheets on our bed from summer cotton
to winter flannelette, I have slipped between the seasons.

New things fill me with terror, the kitsch secondhand
vases make gifts of themselves all over again.

On the balcony you potter, in our pseudo garden—snail
pellets, watering can—and your synthetic overalls.

What am I to make of the scaffold around our apartment,
this new coat? How you apply yourself to exteriors.

Travelling the length of my lip with the thermometer;
this means everything before you take my temperature.

In *Spinifex* David Kirkby writes confidently about his time in the outback in Aboriginal communities. There is a sheer matter-of-factness about this collection, dignified in its desire to record the land and its people. It does not try to elevate these events and experiences to something that they are not, but draws forth a simple beauty. The longer poems work best here, where the reader sees the dignity and maturity of purpose—to tell of another land and its people. Poems that particularly stand out are 'Cicadas (Alice Springs)' and 'Another Death in Utopia.'

To book four *City of my Skin* by Shen. This is personal poetry, risky in a revealing sense, showing us the raw bone and exposed vein of his feelings about his homeland (Malaysia), his father, grandfather and the mix of cultures here in Australia. It is handled in a low key, unsentimental way, but this lyric type of poetry can become too 'Confessional.' The best poems are the descriptive pieces like 'Certifying the dead' and the last two poems in the book 'Instinct' and 'With open eyes.'

From the latter:

Between Seville and Jerez
the feminine curves of the hills
revealed fields of sunflowers.

Tall, upright and fiercely
bare of petals, entire fields
like darkly lashed eyes opened
as stars began wavering
across the sky, celebratory
tablecloth laid at a feast.
Pinpricks of light dotted
the center of each eye. Every
dark iris hid a hundred
promises of light.

Outside, the dusk tensed red sinews
against the line of the horizon like
a creature about to attack prey.
But the more powerful allegory
was closer, just under the line of sight
of the carriage window—the wheels
of the train clattering unceasingly

To the *Cutting room* by Sheridan Linnell. This is a collection where portions of poems and some shrewd lines excite. In 'Cold front':

I park behind her shared terrace house,
a rotting molar in the mouth of Surry Hills,
knock at the back door to the rain's guttural rhythm,
soaking through the heavy
ceiling of her dreams.

And once again the last two poems in this collection 'Contrast medium' and 'Rejection slip' are effective pieces.

Finally to *Crossing the Sky* by Lesley Fowler. In this collection there are a few intense heart-felt poems rendering emotion for the reader. 'Pictures of Terezin' is a powerful piece looking at Auschwitz, the last lines echoing this power:

If a child died
the mother hid the body
collected the rations
for the living.

each poem was distilled from idea through to finished piece. Rather than what we have here, which is just a gathering of the poet's work from other sources—nowadays with such ventures we need to do more and do them differently. We are told in Picaro's PR information that they will be publishing more of our most accomplished poets such as Jean Kent, Andy Kissane, Robert Gray, Lauren Williams, Judith Beveridge, etc ... What Riel is doing here has been done before but at least someone is putting our more accomplished poets' works back out into the market, to hopefully reach a wider audience. Back in the early nineties there was a similar product of equal quality from Nosukumo, out of Melbourne, under the creative editorship of Ian Biarujia, Javant Biarujia and Susan Rachmann who published poets like Alex Skovron and Peter Bakowski, amongst others.

In both these small books we hanker for more of the poets' work. Boyle's book is titled *November in Madrid* (one of the included poems). It is rich and energetic poetry. From 'Last Things':

A single piece of fruit
drains all light from the room,
becomes black and heavy
saturated with the emptiness that surrounds it.
In the hallway
the children's voices have long gone
and anger flickers somewhere behind my eyes
like a worn socket spluttering in a bulb.
I had always imagined something other than this.

The fruit of darkness
lies cool and plump in the palm of a girl's slender hand.
She offers me the last portion,
the first fruit.

In the second of these small books, *people like that*, Joanne Burns' work zings in poems like 'Untitled':

she had more friends
than you could fit
in the back of a truck

that's why she didn't mind
leaving them parked
on a cliff edge

while she went
for a stroll
with the brake in her pocket.

To our third publishing venture Papertiger's CDROM *New World Poetry*, Issue 1, featuring poets from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, USA, United Kingdom, China and the Philippines. It brings both web and print publications to your PC and features more than one hundred text, audio and video poems. There is a lot of very contemporary poetry on this CD. The strength here is not in the individual poet's work but the overall gathering together of many poets from across the world in a variety of formats. Certainly some important Australian names spring out, like Peter Goldsworthy, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, MTC Cronin. This CDROM is certainly worth a look, but a lot of the work falls into the same category as that in the Five Islands Press series. I have doubts about its potential for development.

Australian poetry is still bubbling along, thanks to ventures like these. Firstly, the Five Islands Press series seems very green, new yes, but only a small handful of poems stand out as powerful and indicative of potential. The strength here is that these poets have been given an opportunity through Five Islands Press, now it is up to them to make this initial success breed future success. On the basis of their present poetry, I'd say they have a lot of work ahead of them. The Picaro Press *Wagtail* poetry magazine is an old idea reborn, and I'm hoping Rob Riel does more than is presently being offered. And finally to the CDROM—it's the thing of the future so we are told. In fact I think it's part of a changing future which all of these ventures will contribute to if only they are up to the mark of offering quality, innovative and exciting poetry.

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