

Robert Handicott

TRIM TALES WITH AERIAL ROOTS

Lord of the Parks. Townsville: Writers in Townsville, 1997. 72 pp. ISBN 0646339117. Rrp \$14.

Writers in Townsville publications have come a long way since the weekend in November 1980 when some twenty hopeful locals turned up at the Community Arts Centre with multiple foolscap copies of their various literary productions in hand to contribute to *A Tropical Cocktail*, "a self managed publication for writers and artists in the North." In contrast to that obviously low-budget, rough-and-ready original, *Lord of the Parks*, WIT's latest offering, is a tidy, handsome, professionally produced paperback, published with National Book Council support as well as Townsville City Council assistance. The enigmatic cover design by Lisa McNaughton catches the eye; Hugh Martin's illustrations are sensitive and deft; print and paper quality is pleasing; and the proofreader has missed no more than half a dozen slips. Everyone associated with the production deserves to be congratulated, perhaps no-one more than Yvonne Crossan, a fine storyteller in her own right, a driving force behind WIT for nearly two decades, and the one surviving link between *A Tropical Cocktail* and this new book.

Lord of the Parks contains work by fourteen authors united by the

"parks" theme. Kathleen Smith's "West End by Moonlight" suggests WIT organised writing excursions to particular parks as part of the project. Every story makes at least mention of a park, for example Queen's Gardens, Anzac Park, Anderson Park, the Palmetum or, further afield, Jourama Falls or Mt Spec National Park. Townsville readers will enjoy the references to familiar places and may see those places differently after experiencing them in fiction. Some readers may be challenged to search out the parks of which they have never heard, or to revisit parks unseen perhaps for years. Southern travellers often comment on the small use we Townsville residents make of our excellent public parks and gardens.

The stories are indeed short: we are presented with detailed lapidary work, with carefully polished and faceted miniature pieces, rather than with architecture and sturdy construction. The average length is four pages; and the longest, most developed stories take up less space than is allocated at the back of the book for "Notes." (Presumably this has been done for reasons dictated by printer or binder; but perhaps there has also been the thought that people reading the book in a park might appreciate somewhere to jot down fleeting ideas for stories of their own!) Between Anita Berry's "Pop Winter and Eva," however, which establishes the Townsville setting and, perhaps too, the North Queensland temperament, and Rob Riel's bravura finale, "Objets d'Art,"

the reader finds consistently competent writing in a range of styles and on numerous themes. Fantasy alternates with realism. No reader could possibly complain that the characters lack variety, for in addition to a selection of more-or-less recognisable Townsvillians and their guests, we meet in these stories a bottled insect, a Scottish terrier, Eve, the Devil and the Archangel Michael, ghosts, and a herd of Muttaborrasaurus.

Brevity has its pros and cons. On the negative side, some stories in the collection seem in a hurry to be over: one would appreciate greater length and further development. With little space to build toward impact, feelings tend to be referred to rather than evoked. Adjectives and adverbs can be worked too hard in the effort to achieve compression. Forced notes are heard. On the positive side, the reader's patience is not tested; and the writer has had the valuable experience of working on a text intensively, an experience without which success at greater length is unlikely. Of the stories in which plot is the main interest I liked "The Lost Park" by R. L. Voevodin best, in which the Superintendent for Parks and Recreation is faced with some tricky unexpected situations. Of the more impressionistic stories I enjoyed "Not Yet" by Rochelle Enever most, in which the survivor of a POW camp in Burma objects to a proposed Japanese garden in his local park. It is interesting to

contrast these stories. Both begin at shouting pitch; but whereas the former moves in a neatly constructed circle to achieve surprise, the latter modulates in a way that provokes thought and feeling.

Perhaps surprisingly for a book about Townsville parks—but probably not surprisingly for the work of a local writers' group—there are no shadows in *Lord of the Parks* of sex or violence, such as mark the most disturbing Australian park story I know, Judah Waten's "Black Girl." Nor is there a word of social criticism. No-one has attempted a story about Hanran Park. Writers in Townsville, of course, like writers everywhere else, must be free to choose their own subjects and methods of treatment. The title, *Lord of the Parks*, was inspired by the stage production and video, *Lord of the Dance*, not by *Lord of the Rings* or *Lord of the Flies*! According to an explanatory note, the "Lord of the Parks" is the fig tree, which "mimics the linked arms of the dancers as it spreads branches and puts down roots as it goes." The light, positive tone of this book is one of its charms—and makes for a change. On the other hand, for stories about Townsville to be of interest to people elsewhere—and, really, for them to be of lasting interest to readers here—our city must provide much more than local colour. At least for those of us whose Dreamtime is the culture of Europe, Townsville needs to be written as the setting for stories whose branches go out to the full

range of human experience and whose roots go down securely to psychological depth. It is because Rob Riel's story, depicting the importance of "delusions" in life, has such roots, that it is not only witty and sophisticated, but also significant.

In *Maybe Tomorrow*, Boori (Monty) Pryor, another Townsville author, writes: "To hear stories from and about your own country gives you a strong sense of belonging." He is referring to the stories which only Aboriginal people can tell, but which, he believes, can be important to Australians of all backgrounds. Inheritors of the culture that has made both deserts and gardens of this land, the contributors to *Lord of the Parks* are also, in their different way, helping North Queenslanders "belong." One wishes them well as they grow in their craft, experience, and courage.



Marion J. Hulme

A JOURNEY OF RARE VISION

rear vision, shane rowlands & susi
blackwell. A limited edition artists'
book, 27pp., [Spindrift Press, 1997]

In her first collection of poetry *cicatrized histories* shane rowlands was an angry woman, her pithy and piercing social commentary was indicative of the "uzzi-machine-gun cultural activist" she confessed herself to be. Her poems in *rear vision* are reflective of her original style and have the same biting social context, but with a mature and personal edge. Rowlands is more relaxed with the world and its limitations. Life and more profoundly, death, are portrayed in these poems concerning the life of Susa and that of her grandmother Bertha Lina:

anchor-less
susa is raining
flooding swollen river tears
dissolving with her body's insight

my nana's bones mouldering in
 goondiwindi
my nana's bones home-sickening
 fractious with exile
my nana's bones lying cocooned in the
 dimples of my back

(susa's dimples)

"Susa's dimples" comes early in the collection and weighs in as one of its most profound and moving eulogies.

This book, no larger than a cd, speaks of the voluminous life of Berthe Lina through her granddaughter's eyes. And much more. Susa's thoughts, imaginings and rememberings are chronicled, her life and her grandmother's entwined. The girl's language is a puzzle which