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LET'S TALK ABOUT LIFE

Washing my Mother's Hair by Lesley Fowler, Mockingbird an imprint of Ginninderra Press, ISBN 1 74027 111 4. *The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings* by Cathy Young, Cornford Press, ISBN 0 646 43101 3.

These two books deserve a place on the shelves of every woman's library. They share insights into the intricacies of life's experiences of girls and women alike.

Whether Lesley Fowler's subjects are mothers, daughters, fathers, sons, families, lovers, friends or a mixed combination reaching from the poverty stricken to the elite, she pokes into the corners of the reader's mind to connect with the idiosyncrasies in human nature that create social phenomena. Humour, fear, devotion, loneliness, sadness and love jostle within the pages of this short book to embrace characters as diverse and entertaining as Australian society itself.

Fowler walks through the rhythms of life with characters who evoke the mysteries in relationships of many kinds. The namesake story, *Washing My Mother's Hair*, delights, entertains and resonates. The mother and daughter of this story pass through a conflict which simmers beneath the surface of the mother/daughter relationship to establish a rhythm

of working together. The mother's criticisms quickly establish the boundaries of the relationship, and a grown woman is returned to her child role. In real life where the aged become vulnerable circumstances sometimes prevail producing brief interludes which reunite mother and child. Fowler captures one of these rare and tender moments and contains it in the simple act of washing a mother's hair:

... and put the sachet of conditioner in her hands. It's slippery and she drops it; it slides between the long empty bags of skin that are her breasts and dives down her belly. We reach for it at the same time and both of us miss. It slaps down onto the tiles. We giggle.

It is hard to pick a favourite from the diverse collection of stories in this too-short book created out of such mundanities of life as a present of *Blue Shoes* from an absentee father; fear of the past of another country in *The Good Shoppers*; compassion and status in *The Inheritance* and poverty and hunger of more than one kind in *Fish Point*.

Cathy Young's *The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings* gives a poetic dimension to the lives and relationships of her girls and women. Her world is one of women who are "outsiders." Yet her exclusions in themselves form a cohesive pattern, the rhythm of which is as constant and predictable as a heart beating. "Going against Tradition" is an example of this life-beat: "18 years

of marriage and 10 kids later/she left
the old man fed up with his boozing/
... /the bloke in the laundry/gave
her a job also/let her take shirts
home/for a daughter to iron/the girl
round the corner/turned fourteen
that year/got an exemption from
school/and looked after the baby/
two under five ... /the kids looked
after themselves/grew up all right/
left home when they could/made
room for the others."

By expressing the delusion, isolation and oppressive conditions in the everyday lives of "the hidden faceless women who have done the thankless work we, as a society, are dependent on" [Young's words], Young highlights the difficulties of changing social realities because of the inability of others to recognise the hopes and dreams of "outsiders" and their right to seek change. Her poem "We will have tea in the garden one day" summarises this empathetic flaw in our "multi-cultural" society: "old British Empire daughters/now old ladies on their own/often hire cleaners ... /\$5 per hour ... /tell you about/the kids they had/never had/husbands who passed away/what kind men/made sure they never had to go out to work/officers' wives in India Egypt South Africa/all with servants who gave birth on the job ... / you can hear them/silently timing you/their routine threatened ... /the district nurse is coming next fortnight/can you make it a day later dear?/I take my \$15 with resolutions/working

guidelines established/we will have
tea in the garden one day."

Through the persona of her poem "The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings," Young demonstrates that part of human nature which necessitates recognition to make an individual feel worthwhile: "thought about a transfer to the condom testing section for the embarrassment money/working up to quite a state/ just noticing the eyes of the women I'd followed to work ... /and the older woman biggest smile I'd ever seen in my life pulled/out from that waving shopping bag/a large jar of pickled herrings (rollmops)/we make you feeees Catti/ Twenty-five years later ... /this for you good girl with missing teeth smile/and my heart in one big lump broke from my body." This is poetry alive with the rhythm and struggle of life. Similarly her poem "It's the oneness of it that gets you" crosses the same abyss: "but what can you do when/someone stops eating just lays there/waiting for the rest of time to pass?/ ... There's little parcels in her freezer/one chop apiece."

This collection of poems weaves a historical trail of the intimacies inherent in the lives of women and girls, migrant and factory workers who transact the unrenowned jobs that make our world function. There is a deeply rooted sense of inevitability and the capacity of the human spirit to endure. Young's final poem "Cheers drink up here's one for the road" from its beginning to its

closing lines confirm this: "It's time
to move/when you've run out of
paths/when feet don't match/ ... /
tomorrow's another day another
country/cheers drink up here's one
for the road/leave your worries with/
the ones who caused them."

