

AUSTRALIANS AWARE

Poems & paintings of today, selected by Rodney Hall, Ure Smith, 63 pp., \$4.95.

Australians Aware! It rings like a fascist slogan - Eternal Awareness is the Price of Aesthetics! Stick three nudes on the cover and you're onto a good thing. Potential buyers should be equally divided between readers of *The Bulletin* and the *Nation Review*.

Perhaps only reviewers ask why a book was written. The question can often lead to fruitful insight. In this case it has no answer. No-one wrote it, many people did. Rodney Hall selected the fruits of their labour, and allowed his name to be used on the dustjacket.

Now why did he do that? This question echoes on with the first, for Hall has provided no glimpse into his motivation. There is no prologue, foreword, preface or other gentle setting of the scene. Flick past the contents page and you are in waist-deep. Perhaps in post-grants Australia, it is at last sufficient for a book to be.

Australians Aware is a rare thing. A successful combination of recent works in verbal and visual art forms. Rare, because although the combination is not new, the success is. The last few years have produced several grisly examples of kitsch purporting to combine poetry with painting. This one is good. Perhaps precisely because it has no theme or ideology, but is simply a pleasant ramble through the works of painters, printers and poets presently or recently active in Australia.

On the visual side there is the intellectual neo-Heidelbergism of Fred Williams, and the primitive expressionism of Andrew Sibley. A heavy weighting of old masters, like Fairweather, Gleeson, Dickerson and Counihan. And a few surprises. Blackman appears not as a melancholy fauve, but a sinister expressionist. Jeffrey Smart didn't show up, but Bryan Westwood apologised for him rather convincingly.

Much of the poetry is more contemporary than the paintings and prints. There are idols amongst the verses, but no old masters. This sums up the book's thrust reasonably well.

A third question might be, who will buy it? It doesn't contain the safe anthologous man-in-the-street-known names, so one assumes it to be aimed above twits. It is by no pretension underground or even really contemporary, so it won't appeal to the people who keep up with what's going on. Must be aimed at trendies. If it were bigger and more expensive, it would be a superb coffee table book.

I bought it because I liked the stuff in it. I think it's the only book I own containing good poems and good prints, which doesn't pretend the two have something to do with each other. Mind you, it's pretending something, but I'm not sure what.