LIVING IN THE AGE OF FEUILLETON


Some poetry is admirable for its craft, some for its lyricism, or beauty, or depth. The work of Joanne Burns lacks none of these attributes, but its virtue resides chiefly in the author's clarity, and in the sharp, often stunning originality of her vision.

The most convenient category for Burns' work would be "social satire"; Geoff Page, writing in *American Book Review,* praises her as "Australia's most substantial (and cutting) satirist." True enough, though incomplete. In the short future-history with which Hesse prefaces *Magister Ludi,* the narrator makes reference to the "Age of Feuilleton," a period which "... appears to have had only the dimmest notion of what to do with culture. Or rather, it did not know how to assign culture its proper place within the economy of life and the nation." This is Burns' starting point; her satiric vision is the foundation on which she hastens to erect the framework of a more wholesome perspective:

\[ \text{like an orange pip that's dropped under a stove} \]

Burns' powerful poetic imagination always serves her goal of stimulating an inventive, disturbing reflection. As a vigorous and respected feminist whose credentials span three decades, the proper place of women within the economy of life and the nation is of special concern. Her global perspective is intended to perturb:
... there they go: an army of
girlie ladies dressed like brochures in
tomato
red, reliable as heart beats, swishing
in their
corporate uniforms ... you take a left
turn
away from this style of female .
suffrage the
only men in red are clowns or
cardinals ...
(from mere anarchy)

But this is not an overtly ideological
collection, nor is it serious in the
sense of being humburless. The tone
is wry and mischievous; even at her
most savage, Burns is smiling with
at least one side of her mouth:

the day, slightly anxious that time
is running out, decides on a personal
trainer to improve its sluggish speed,
doris is her name ...
(from mere anarchy)

Gravitas is not incompatible with the
occasional chuckle. In his speech at
this book's launch, Laurie Duggan
remarked that "aerial photography
makes you wonder why the multi-
nationals left the field, and why
poetry is seen to be a back number."
The text is marvellously accessible,
and the cultural commentary is
fundamentally egalitarian, never
elitist, arrogant, or bitter. In the
broad church of modern poetry,
Burns is more likely to be found
sitting in the same pew with Bruce
Dawe than with Les Murray:

the window's view of council sweepers
dragging and pushing brooms along
the gutters
and pavements at the speed of tai chi
students sends you all snoozy and
you soon find yourself on your knees
gazing into the fridge in wait for
some edible motivation to appear
(from mere anarchy)

This is Burns' eleventh book, and Ivor
Indyk's cover blurb declares it her
best. He may be right; it is certainly a
departure from the beautifully
surreal prose poetry which charac-
terised penelope's knees (1996), on a
clear day (1992), and blowing bubbles
in the 7th lane (1988), though the
place of culture and what society
ought to do about it remains a
constant theme across Burns' long
career. There are no weak pieces in
this collection, nothing unsubtle or
needlessly obscure. It is an enter-
taining, informative read:

to be unblemished
is itself a blemish —
the world shines
through like a delicate
rash —
(split infinitive)

Overland editor Pam Brown credits
Burns with "... seeing the Australian
world and its historically youthful
rituals as a very absurd and sometimes
dangerous place." In the Age of
Feuilleton, that could be an invaluable
perspective, and perhaps the only
honest one. Highly recommended.