

# READING & RELISHING

*Edited by Robyn Rowland*

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Like many poets, women poets in particular, I find the time to read poetry is constantly squeezed between snatched moments to write and the full tide of domesticity. It's interesting though, to have a look inside the reading lives of poets. Often, they give us directions in which our own reading might follow; often they introduce us to books and authors never discovered unless by word-of-mouth: our own e-mag. This section is a brief musing by a poet each month on their own reading of poetry, particularly the work they are enjoying. Hopefully, you'll want to go out and buy some more poetry!

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This month our contribution comes from Melbourne poet **Claire Gaskin**. Claire was born in 1966 and lives with her two daughters in Melbourne. She has also lived in country Victoria, most recently in Mansfield. She is a yoga teacher and has taught literature and professional writing for eighteen years, and has been publishing her poetry in literary journals since 1985. Her first full length book, *A Bud*, was published by John Leonard Press in 2006, and was shortlisted for the John Bray Award for Poetry (National) in 2008.

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## **Claire Gaskin:**

One half of my bed is filled with books and notebooks and papers taking up the space of a body.

Both bedside tables are piled with books. The most recent bookshelf I've found on the side of the road is filled with books and then, stacked with books on top. I am still buying books.

One of the books close at hand is, *The Clouds Float North* by Yu Xuanji, (844-868AD) The following is from the poem, Curing Yourself When Lovesick

and lie there in your bed  
with books spread all around you

a little too happy to bother  
rising to fix your hair. [1]

This woman, Yu Xuanji, writing in the T'ang Dynasty provokes thought about gender. She was a 'lesser wife'[2], and then a Daoist nun. A number of the poems suggest she was a courtesan as well. In such a short life I think it is

amazing she experienced these three different roles available to women. In this poem she appears to have achieved autonomy.

Another woman who achieved autonomy was Anais Nin. Her books also lay beside my bed. Buying and making my way through her seven volumes of journals has been interrupted by reading for teaching short stories. I have *The View from Castle Rock* by Alice Munro in my bed. I love the way she does what the hell she likes with long preambles and loose narrative. I have Katherine Mansfield's *Selected Stories* and Angela Carter's *Collected Short Stories* in bed as well. Recently, I was delighted to find the Carter book at the Daylesford market because I have been looking for it for a long time.

I am not reading only women; I have pulled Kerouac's *Book of Dreams* off the shelf in the lounge to have by my bedside to re-read because I keep running across young male students still emulating The Beats. I've just read William Burroughs' *Queer* for the first time and have *Naked Lunch* in my bag. I've used an excerpt from *Queer* this week in classes to teach characterization.

I have John Tranter's *Urban Myths*, on the floor beside my bed which I am nearly half way through and Nathaniel Tarn's *selected poems 1950-2000* in the bed. I really like the following from Tarn.

To be happy like this day  
Many days need to have been lived,[3]

On my right bedside table are books I hope to get to this term break. Anais Nin's, *The Four- Chambered Heart* is on top of Luce Irigaray's *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* which is on top of Sean Dooley's *Anoraks to Zitting Cisticola*, which is about the culture of bird watching.

Reading Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants* again with students this week we discussed whether male writers do female characters convincingly and reading Katherine Mansfield's story *The Stranger*, whether women do male characters convincingly. It's a courageous thing to do, taking on a portrayal of your opposite gender. I like Mansfield's thinking in the following quote.

'I believe the greatest failing of all is to be frightened'.

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## Works Referenced

Yu Xuanji, *The Clouds Float North*. Translated by David Young and Jiann I Lin, Wesleyan University Press, 1998

Alice Munro, *The View From Castle Rock*, Vintage Books London, 2006

Katherine Mansfield, *Selected Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1989

Angela Carter, *Collected Short Stories: Burning Your Boats*, Vintage, 1996

Jack Kerouac, *Book of Dreams*, City Light Books, 1976

William Burroughs, *Queer*, Picador, 1985

William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, Grove Weidenfeld, 1990

John Tranter, *Urban Myths: 210 poems*, UQP, 2006

Nathaniel Tarn, *selected poems 1950- 2000*, Wesleyan Poetry, 2002

Anais Nin, *The Four Chambered Heart*, Swallow Press, 1987

Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*: Translated by Gillian C Gill, Columbia University Press, 1991

Sean Dooley, *Anoraks to Zitting Cisticola*, Allen & Unwin, 2007

Ernest Hemingway, *Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987

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## Footnotes

1 Yu Xuanji, *The Clouds Float North*: Translated by David Young and Jiann I Lin, Wesleyan University Press, 1998 p. 36

2 Ibid. p. ix

3 Nathaniel Tarn, *selected poems 1950- 2000*, Wesleyan Poetry, 2002