

READING AND RELISHING

Edited by Robyn Rowland

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!

Our first contribution comes from **Geoff Page** in Canberra. Geoff has written seventeen books of poetry and several novels and verse novels. He has won the Grace Leven Prize for poetry and the Patrick White Literary Award. His latest books are *Agnostic Skies* (Five Islands Press, 2006). *Lawrie & Shirley: The Final Cadenza: A Movie in Verse* (Pandanus Press, 2007).

Geoff Page:

What have I been reading lately? What poetry have I been reading lately, to be precise? Having spent nearly four decades enjoining students of both literature and writing to read widely, I must admit to having done too little of it in recent months. One reason for this was a ten weeks' reading and lecturing tour in Europe which I finished in late May. Another is my post-retirement-from-school-teaching habits of writing and organising (poetry readings and jazz concerts) rather than doing the extensive reading I had so long deferred until "I had the time".

In Europe I was reading mainly my own poetry but also that of other modern and contemporary Australian poets. I talked about the role of Australian poets in the canon of great poems in English, especially from our own point of view. On the train between gigs and visiting friends I wrote a hundred or so eight-liners, casting a sceptical but delighted eye on much that I saw and heard. I also read two novels by Carol Shields and one by Alice Munro (not relevant here).

Coming back from giving a talk in Presov (in eastern Slovakia), I turned through some contemporary Slovakian poetry (in translation) which I'd been given as a farewell present. Most notable was the anthology, *Not Waiting for Miracles* (Modry Peter), edited by Brano Hochel and the English poet, James Sutherland Smith. It certainly contained very different physical and metaphysical landscapes from the ones which must have emerged from the Australian poems I'd been reading to my Presov audience. Unlike the

Australian poetry, it was densely metaphoric, deeply subjective, closely derived from folk tales and so on. Some of it a bit self-conscious, of course, but certainly strong enough to make one think again about the relative plainness one's own work.

A second enjoyable reading experience was provided by the Italian academic and poet, Marco Fazzini, who gave me a copy of his translations from the Scottish poet, Douglas Dunn. He also gave me his *Alba Literaria: A History of Scottish Literature* (Amos Edizioni), an 825 page volume which is going to have to wait till later. It's indicative though of how unpredictable European literary and academic interests can be. Who would have thought of a Venetian poet becoming such an expert on Scottish literature?

The Dunn volume (Long Ago) ranged over his work, right from *Terry Street* (1969) to *The Year's Afternoon* (2000). I remember being moved by the directness and compassion of *Terry Street* when it first came out but must admit that Dunn is a poet I tended to lose track of subsequently. This book reminds one of how substantial his work is — both fiercely political (in a Scottish nationalist sense) and deeply personal (particularly the poems about his wife's death from cancer). It also contains what I'd consider the definitive anti-imperial poem, "Empire", which starts: "All the dead Imperia ... They have gone / Taking their atlases and grand pianos. / They could not leave geography alone. / They conquered with the thistle and the rose."

Back home now, I've written four reviews, the first being of Dorothy Porter's recent verse novel, *El Dorado* (Pan MacMillan, Picador), probably her best so far, owing to its greater-than-usual depth of characterisation while, at the same time, losing none of the pace characteristic of the form — and especially her treatment of it.

I've also reviewed three other books by Australian poets of very different generations. Thomas Shapcott's *The City of Empty Rooms* (from the UK publisher, Salt) has an almost valedictory tone, re-creating in detail his childhood in Ipswich near Brisbane in the 1940s, while at the same time containing some strongly political poems on the issue of refugees and detention centres — and a convincing sequence of poems on classical musicians, particularly Eugene Goossens.

David Brooks' *Urban Elegies* (Island Press) is the "other side" of his 2005 book, *Walking to Point Clear*. Known best as a fiction writer and academic, David Brooks, at 54 now, demonstrates here that inner-city Sydney can be as productive for poetry as the more obviously "poetic" south coast of NSW which was at the centre of much of his earlier work.

Equally successful, but at an almost opposite pole, is *A Paddock in his Head* (Five Islands Press) by the relatively young Victorian poet, Brendan Ryan. Ryan grew up on a dairy farm in a large Catholic family and his recollections of

this experience are very much at the core of the book. There are also highly-evocative poems about the north-eastern edge of Melbourne where many of those who have left the land (and left other lands, for that matter) end up. If the dairy farm was a place of many negatives, life in these suburbs is no more cheery, it would seem.

One problem with reviewing energetically is that one keeps up with one's own "scene", as it were, without allowing the time for catching up on all the classics one has somehow avoided so far. All these lacunae are regrettable, some of them embarrassing, but, as they say in the public service (and in politics), it's a matter of priorities. The here-and-now tends to be more clamorous than the far off — whether it's in time or space. Perhaps there is a resolution here.