

# 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 **Leah Kaminsky**.

**Leah** is a doctor and a writer. She has published two non-fiction books and a poetry chapbook *Spilt Milk* (RMIT poets ed Judith Rodriguez & Antoni Jach). Last year she won the Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship for Fiction at Varuna and came second in the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award (FAW). She has published short fiction and poetry in many journals/newspapers including *Quadrant*, *Voices*, *Poetry Australia*, *Divan*, *Fine Line*, *Mattoid* and *The Age*.

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## **Leah Kaminsky**

I am a general practitioner by profession. To be a good GP, you need to know a little about everything. The downside is that you don't know a lot about anything! It strikes me that I take the same approach with my reading habits – I'm kind of eclectic and at times random, waiting for that book to obey the laws of serendipity and jump out at me from the shelf, saying: It's my turn! Look at me! That happened with *The Lost*, a memoir by Daniel Mendelsohn. It came to me at a time that was perfect. The author's own search for family and piecing together of what happened to them during the holocaust in Europe, took me on a parallel journey of my own.

I am currently working on a novel called *The Waiting Room*. Some days, when it's not going well and I am searching in every corner of the house for that darned elusive narrative arc, I think to myself that giving birth to three children was so much easier. Don't get me wrong - I love writing fiction, but all too often I find that when I put pen to blank page, out sneaks a poem instead. Little rascal. It has been lurking there in my unconscious mind, just waiting for a chance to jump out and shout: Pick me! Pick me!, dancing around wildly on the page. It doesn't surprise me. I have often turned to poetry when I am lost for words in my novel, and need a jumpstart. So I will inevitably pick up a collection of poems on my desk and flip through the

pages, looking for a word or phrase to inspire me. Yehuda Amichai's poetry will do the trick one morning when I am writing about the impact of war on ordinary people. He was a famous Israeli poet whose voice cried out for peace:

God has pity on kindergarten children,  
He pities school children — less.  
But adults he pities not at all.

New Yorker Sharon Olds' poignant, simple poems make me weep when I am writing about my children:

Suddenly his shoulders get a lot wider,  
the way Houdini would expand his body  
while people were putting him in chains...

(from *My Son the Man*)

Canadian author Margaret Atwood's poetry is great on any rainy afternoon:

Each time I hit a key  
on my electric typewriter,  
speaking of peaceful trees

another village explodes.

(from *It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers*)

William Carlos Williams, an American doctor-poet writing in the 1950's, when I am fed up with Mrs Turnoff shuffling in to the clinic and complaining about her daughter for the umpteenth time:

They call me and I go.  
It is a frozen road  
past midnight, a dust  
of snow caught  
in the rigid wheeltracks

(Complaint).

Anne Sexton, another American poet, is great when I am feeling cranky at the world or just plain premenstrual:

My nerves are turned on. I hear them like  
musical instruments.

Poetry is always the springboard for my fiction. I guess I shouldn't be shocked when people who have read my work tell me that my prose is poetic. Well, the little buggers insinuate themselves into my sentences, don't they? I can't help it - poetry is just so deliciously irresistible. I can't stop the blurring

of what are supposed to be two different genres. OK, so the novel isn't going to sell like Dan Brown, but hey, what the heck, I'm enjoying myself.

It is no coincidence that the books I am drawn to read also use poetry in their language. Irish author Anne Enright's Booker prize winning novel *The Gathering*, had me spellbound at times with her turn of phrase. And famous Israeli novelist Amos Oz's *Of Love and Darkness* has an hypnotic rhythm. Poetry takes me to a place that distills the daily fluff from the world. It cuts to the quick. It is pure honesty. As a doctor I have always seen each patient that enters my room as a walking poem. But when I started to place a few patients together onto a page, they became a short story and eventually grew unexpectedly into a novel. So patients feed my poetry and then poetry feeds my prose. I think that in the end, both poetry and prose make me a better doctor, because I am better able to hear each patient's individual voice.

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### References

- Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006  
Sharon Olds, *The Gold Cell*, Knopf 1987  
Yehuda Amichai, *Selected Poetry*, Harper Collins 1994  
Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, Vintage 2007  
Margaret Atwood, *Eating Fire*, Virago Press 1998  
William Carlos Williams' <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Williams-WC.html> - (poet reading this poem)  
Amos Oz, *A Tale Of Love and Darkness*, Harcourt 2004  
Anne Sexton, *45 Mercy Street*, Houghton Mifflin 1976