

<http://www.cordite.org.au/reviews/ryan-scott-reviews-the-best-australian-poems-2008#more-2907>

.....
Best Australian Poems 2008 edited by Peter Rose
Black Inc., 2008

Review by Ryan Scott

Posted at Cordite on 9 March 2009 www.cordite.org.au

When an anthology purports to represent the best poetry of a time or region, it's fair to assume someone will question the validity of its publication. "On what criteria is this judged?" some readers might wonder. "Can poetry really have a best?" others will ask. "Why wasn't I included?" a few may dare voice aloud. The word 'Australian' can be just as controversial. "What does 'Australian' mean?"; "Can these poets really speak for us?" The answers provided by *The Best Australian Poems 2008* are indirect at best.

Regarding the issue of what constitutes the best poetry, Peter Rose's response is diversity. Rather than restrict himself to a narrow range of styles or themes, he has assembled traditional rhymed verse along with pieces that illustrate the potential of poetic expression. It is a selection in which the delicate, measured ode of Stephen Edgar sits beside, and segues well into, the racing 'thrash verse' of Michael Farrell. Through these poems, Rose seems to be saying that a good poem can be many things. However, what makes these particular poems qualify Rose doesn't say. It appears that he wants the poems to make the case for themselves.

Some hint of what he was looking for can be found in the introduction to the previous anthology. Here, Rose stated that he sought poetry which was "expressive and resonant and open-hearted". At first, this criteria appears vague, even diplomatically so. On second thoughts, this does come close to naming some of the qualities we seek in a poem. Irrespective of whether your predilection is rhyme and meter, free verse, cut-ups, concrete poetry or performance poetry, you are struck by the piece which possesses all or most of these features. If it commands its voice, it is expressive; if it fills an imaginative space, it is resonant, and if it invites you into this space, it is open-hearted.

Not having read all the poems which were under consideration, I cannot objectively judge whether these poems best meet his criteria. Even if I had, it wouldn't be the point. Unlike a gymnastics competition, an anthology is not the outcome of its judgement. The book should reflect a poetic sensibility expressed through the work of others. In this area, I disagree with a statement Rose made in the earlier anthology; a best of is not just "an essential marketing device to reward that old tart 'excellence' and to encourage shiny new practitioners". A better analogy would be an exhibition or a mix-tape, where the works of others are used to create a mood, an impression in a space and moment.

Together the poems in *The Best Australian Poems 2008* achieve exactly this, partly through the coming together of various moods and modes, but also in the shared assuredness of their voices. This does not mean these poems are loud, blaring, declarative things – though some are. You will also encounter moments of quiet reflection along with wry commentary. Regardless of the approach, the poets on the whole have stayed true to the poetic voice they have chosen to work with. There is very

little aimless reaching, few jarring word choices or poorly executed images. These are poems which know what they are meant to be.

Geoffrey Lehmann's 'Self Portrait at 62' is one of the more ostensibly personal of the seventy-one poems. His piece is an example of how an impact can be made with direct, unpretentious and economic language – fitting for a poet who is also an accountant:

Now we come to the day of this self-portrait,
an ordinary day when no-one dies or falls in love,
aged 62, a few days south of 63.

We have a simple image of a man reflecting on age. But is it really so simple? In these lines as in other moments throughout the poem, we share Lehmann's realisation, the great internal silence it brings and the man who inhabits it. Lacking from the poem is an attempt to claim this emotional space as his own. He does not pretend he is the only one to feel this way. It is merely one individual's experience. By making it so personal – lunch in a Buddhist restaurant, making orange juice, his daughter's recovery from MS – Lehmann allows us to share in his experience.

In contrast, Kevin Gillam's piece is terse and doesn't adopt such an obvious persona. His poetry achieves its effects through the sudden but exquisite turn of its images. Just take the first triplet as an example:

everything took longer,
purple rhymed. there were lots of
thems. we lived in small windows.

In those few lines Gillam spins us out into some alien world – a geographical as much as a linguistic one, where grammatical rules are not only broken but more importantly seem wrong. Here, this 'mistake' somehow reads true. While Lehmann's work is a juncture in a life made large, Gillam's work is the proverbial world in the palm of your hand.

Louis Armand's approach is even more removed from obvious subject matter. Rather than the language being used to articulate feeling or create a fantasy, the lines and images seem to build a fractured and at times showy barrier to the world:

Repudiate the old sorrows. Laughter, rebuke.
A catharsis of ratios, situations, pitfall of holding onto
words-without-fault as though you were an ear.

The result is a labyrinth of twisting and conflicting meaning in which the reader finds no comfort until the final lines "the voice / dwindling, their faint ingenious cadences". Even then, it's only the comfort of melancholy. As such, Armand achieves exactly what Rose mentioned in the previous volume because he shows that even obscurity can be a poetic device in its own right.

If the approach to writing a good poem is multi-faceted then writing an Australian poem is even more so. Rose does not directly address why these poems are Australian. Perhaps, it's a hangover from the Howard years, or the recent thuggery of some Australians, which has made this issue something best avoided. Perhaps, Rose feels it is a non-issue. If 'best' is a quality mired by commercial concerns or narrow

misconceptions then whether a poet comes from this country or that country is irrelevant.

Australia does not wave itself, star speckled and blue, in the poems. It creeps into them. It comes in the form of herons (Judith Beveridge, 'Heron at Dusk') and lantana (Ross Clark, 'Danger: Lantana') or in the comparisons between the American wildlife and our own in Robert Adamson's 'Letter to Joanne Kyger':

...the dome of the sky hung with
turkey buzzards
instead of pelicans.
The roadkill was mainly skunks
rather than wombats.

I can't think of a more ironic evocation of homesickness and one which captures that quietly Australian quality, when it manifests, of acceptance.

There are other Australian voices to be heard. The narrator of Sandy Fitts' 'Waiting for Goya' is not simply Australian in the casual way he peppers the monologue with 'mate'. It is the charming brashness that makes this piece uniquely Australian:

...For, as they tell it, until mid-life
Goya was more or less court lackey. Interior
decorator with ambition. Tapestries to please.

The voice echoes over the slow drudge past European culture. And it isn't contemptuous, merely questioning. It's a voice that isn't simply going to bow to posterity. In all these examples I can find an Australia with which I identify, a small 'a' Australia – or should I say australia, which is not such a bad place to be.

In his 2007 introduction, Rose expressed reservation about anthologies because they divert people's attention from the poetry of the chapbooks and slim volumes. Through his selection, he has shown why anthologies remain relevant. As the few poems cited above show, the single strength of anthologies is the diversity a good editor brings together. It is an opportunity to allow a multitude of voices to tackle the question of expression and let them make it relevant to poetry readers, no matter how much our numbers are dwindling. If this is the case then this anthology has its place in that it will draw attention through the use of 'best'. But 'best' does not have to mean a finishing point. It can be where people start to engage with poetry. If the result is that it leads more people to question this notion then it has achieved just as much as if it had established some irrefutable aesthetic framework.

Ryan Scott lives in the Czech Republic and maintains a weblog.

.....