

placed. Rather, we tap into a moment of their lives — most often a subtle moment of crisis — in which nothing is made explicit. A man helps drive two people who have been involved in a car accident to a hospital; a young asthmer is given the responsibility of his young asthmer suffering daughter for the day; a man's house is invaded by a gang of thieves. The tendency to withhold background information on characters gives Disher's stories an immediacy and clarity, which at the same time often leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling of not knowing enough.

Disher, who is a crime writer, is preoccupied with gaps in stories, the way in which the reader might be able to

detect what is missing. Although these stories could not really be defined as crime writing, one is still forced to play an active role — that of the detective — in reading. The emotional motive of a character is as interesting a puzzle to solve as a criminal motive: the two are often intertwined. What leads two of the characters — both middle-class middle-aged men — to inflict damage upon their neighbour's property? Why does a woman take her boyfriend on a strange trip to meet her ex-lover?

The language used in these stories — precise, well-crafted — helps to create the sense of clarity. It has a stylised, 'hard-edged' quality to it, which no doubt stems from Disher's background as a writer of detective fiction.

There is something American in his tone, yet the stories — as a result of keen observation of characters, objects and settings — remain particularly Australian.

This is, finally, an entertaining book. It is also an engaging collection, whose complexity is perhaps initially hidden. Disher knows how to write a story that will grab and retain attention, whilst at the same time reflecting intelligently upon our society.

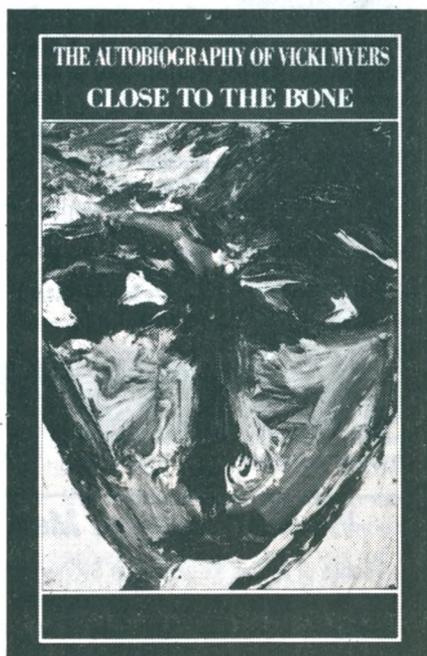
**MATTHEW SCHULTZ** is a poet whose work has appeared in *Westerly*, *Overland*, *Outrider*, *Mattarra Poetry Prize Anthology* and other journals. He is currently writing a novel.

## Empty Vessel

**The Autobiography of Vicki Myers: Close to the Bone** by Davida Allen (Simon & Schuster).  
Reviewed by Moha Melhem.

Davida Allen's *Close to the Bone* is not one of those books that inspires you to write a precious and brilliant review, in fact it just doesn't inspire — not like the way you were inspired years ago by reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* or by seeing your first Robert de Niro movie. No, *Close to the Bone* is not even as thrilling as watching *When Harry Met Sally* on television the other week — which is probably why I read the book in the commercial breaks. It is rather sad that a book which is all about escaping boredom and reading orgasmic levels of excitement should leave you with such a "Yeah, so what?" feeling...

*Close to the Bone* as autobiography reconstructs the life of an artist, artistically of course, in montage. Vicki Myers, whose autobiography the text claims to be, is quite obviously Davida Allen herself. Allen presents the autobiography as a "portrait of the Artist As Ordinary Housewife". But despite this claim to ordinariness Vicki delights in showing us that she is in fact extraordinary, as she invites



us to wallow with her in the "unique creative mind" of an "Artist".

It is when Vicki is most threatened with becoming merely ordinary — like all other housebound mothers — that her "unique creative mind" comes to the rescue, rising above the seemingly insurmountable mountains of nappies and taking her to the dizzying heights of artistic imagination. Vicki's art liberates her, her "rage

at being a woman" explodes into, and is somehow resolved by the sexual fantasies she plays out in her paintings. But Vicki's paintings and her relationship with Greg (the husband who encourages Vicki's self-liberation through art) suggest a sexual violence and objectification in which Vicki revels. "I like being the one ravaged. I don't ever want to be [Greg's] equal sexually" she says. Vicki likes the "idea of a woman as a vessel of love and passion. Being Greg's vessel is very important to me".

Apart from being dubious about the nature of Vicki's self-liberation, I was disappointed by Allen's failure to make the connection between Vicki's "rage at being a woman", and the rage of millions of other women trapped in "domestic horror". But perhaps I am being overly critical — why should Allen's portrait also represent images of other women? Autobiography/self-portraiture is, after all, by its very nature, self-obsessed. And why should the self-portrait be of a self which is like others; for isn't every "Artist's" greatest fear the fear of being thought not brilliant, not genuine, not *extraordinary*?

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