Re-dressing the Press

Reviewed by Beth Spencer

Redress Press is a new Australian feminist publishing cooperative which operates as a "book packager" — that is, something mid-way between an agent and a publisher. It initiates or accepts manuscripts and then contracts to sell the finished books to marketing publishers who handle the distribution.

In 1984, its first year, Redress (in conjunction with Wild and Woolley and the Aboriginal Artists Agency, and assisted by the Literature Board) published four books by women, one of them a black woman. This is a great achievement and it is to be hoped that Redress will maintain a similar or better proportion of black or migrant writers in the future.


In Welou, My Brother Faith Bandier tells the story of her brother growing up in a country town in NSW. The book opens with a scene of Welou’s father’s funeral depicted from the boy’s perspective. It then goes back to Welou’s birth and traces his early years up until the final illness of his father Wacvi. Wacvi’s story has been told in an earlier autobiographical novel by Bandier: an Islander shanghaied by whites and brought to Queensland to work the cane fields in the late nineteenth century. Wacvi escaped and came to live in NSW in an area farmed predominantly by Irish immigrants.

Welou is brought up to a mixture of cultures, partaking in the life of three different kinds of families: his own family who blend Island traditions with Christianity and a desire for the sons to acquire a white education and so escape the "life of toil"; the large warm Irish Catholic family that Welou goes to live and work with, enabling him to attend school; and the "old men" from the Islands, centred around Billy Bong, who becomes a special figure to Welou and a link with the past.

The dramatic tension arises from the fact that, although throughout the narrative Welou’s mother’s desire for his education — and via this his advancement in Australian society — is continually stressed, the picture of Welou at twelve years old that begins the book links him strongly with the life of hard manual labour and the old ways of the old men: “When the men who had come for his father’s funeral shook his hand, they felt corns and callouses like those on their own hands.”

But Welou’s story is not the story of the victim, as one might expect from this scenario. Bandier has written a quite moving and thoughtful book which explores the complexities of cultural ties and desires, the conflicts and loyalties within a colonised and uprooted people as they try to make their way in a new country while preserving their links with the old.

The book cannot be classified as either "optimistic" or "pessimistic", in the same way that the characters are in no way reducible to representatives of "good" or "bad". Welou’s fate is neither tragic nor triumphant — it has elements of both. The style of the book refuses such stereotypes and breaks away from the tradition of pleading a minority cause by presenting the hero/ine as either victim of oppression or successful (and hence atypical) rebel. There is a fatalism about the style that is nevertheless positive in that it is the fatalism of the pre-industrial, the community, where individualism and individual achievement is not the highest goal, the measure of success, where the pace of life is slower and one life flows into another.

The back cover recommends the book for “students of social and multicultural studies”. Let’s hope educators in Australia take the initiative and add this book to the secondary school’s curriculum.

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Colleen Burke's fourth collection of poems, *She Moves Mountains*, is a well-chosen and unified collection. This book is worth reading like a narrative, from cover to cover in one sitting. Unless, of course, like the poet, you have a toddler: "if you try and rest or read a book they climb all over you or throw the contents of the kitchen cupboards on the floor. Mix cocoa, spaghetti and flour/piss in the middle, stir it all up and offer you the first lick". (p.54)

Sound familiar? Then you'd probably enjoy the book. Like this one and the title poem, the first poem is about Burke's daughter and sets the rhythm and tone of the volume as it locates the speaker as a working mother in inner-city Sydney. In this way, Burke seems to be announcing defiantly that mothering and writing/creativity are not only compatible but, indeed, complementary ways of interacting with the world.

The poems web together to reproduce the world of the poet. One in which concern over nuclear proliferation, nervousness at resuming work after having a baby, the wonder and love and frustration of having a child, and grief at the death of an Irish hunger striker all impinge on daily life with equal intensity. There is no order, no hierarchy of concerns, no granting certain subjects are more "poetical" or worthy of a poem than others. There is a looseness but sureness in the form that reflects the setting of a house with a baby in the city: things are tackled as they arise, life is surprising, plans must always be tentative and hence not too ambitious; chaotic at times, but things get done and the poems, like everything else, renew themselves each day.

One of my favourite poems in the collection is called "A characteristic common to men and ferns".

... sometimes envy the single-mindedness of men, and the ferns tilting their leaves to the greenwind.

This is a good strong collection which moulds celebration and protest, humour and anger, mothering and creativity — and offers you a lick.


Mother's Day, by Leonie Sperling, is a very different treatment of a similar theme. The book consists of two novellas: *Thanatos* and *Narcissus*. Both novellas use a similar style and both deal with aspects of motherhood and the ambivalent relations of a mother to her child and to the world.

I did not feel — as the back cover claims — that it "makes us wonder how narrowly we have escaped fates similar to theirs", or even that it made me "examine my own life". In fact, the style so distances the characters — contains them in a kind of glass bubble (like those fancy paperweights that snow on the little village when you shake them) — that I could only occasionally respond emotionally to their plight, and never "identified" with them in the classical realist sense.

Nor did I find the book an "action packed .... thriller" — in fact the denouements are prefigured and anticipated throughout.

In a sense, this constitutes part of the book's interest: the plot(s) and theme naturally give rise to a range of publicity cliches — "controversial", "disturbing and disconcerting", "its rawness", etc. — in much the same way that a picture of a mother and her child habitually calls forth another set of cliches — "love", "self-sacrifice", "joy", etc. The same principle is at work: it is because the central mother-child relationships in the book are ambivalent (to say the least) that they are hence "controversial".

What is this thing, motherhood, that draws out such guilt and awe? This is what the book is about, although — to me — it theoretically explores the issues rather than emotionally and dramatically plays them out. While this makes it lose out on one level — I wouldn't say it was a book that I thoroughly enjoyed, nor did it make me dredge up unconscious feelings regarding my mother (I don't have any children so I cannot comment on the other side of it) — this absence of involvement, this "what-if-ness" of the style, makes it a very interesting and worthwhile text.
It is the kind of text that will, I think, accumulate meaning, will change as the world changes, as the discourse on motherhood and femininity changes, as human relationships change. It is like a kind of litmus paper, a gauntlet, a cheshire cat that smiles and disappears and reappears, the smile suspended, hanging, unpredictable. It is a book that I am reluctant to make any judgment on as a literary work. Perhaps this, too, stems back to the sacredness of its topic: motherhood — I am not a mother, how can I enter adequately, as a reader, this holy of holies: a book exploring the emotions of a mother as mother.

Certainly it is a book that I would be interested to see some discussion about. I find the publicity hype to date unconvincing. More than that: evasive. It smacks of the twentieth century faith that if only we can bring it out in the open and talk about it, then everything will be all right. Supposedly this book does that, for all of us. so now that we have “examined our own lives” everything can start getting better and honest and open and .... I wonder.


Pamela Brown's *Selected Poems 1971-1982*: the more you get into this book the more you get into it. When was the last time you bought a poetry book? And actually sat and read it? Perhaps one of the reasons Brown doesn’t usually make it into the boys’ anthologies (such as *The Younger Australian Poets*, a recent anthology which, as one reviewer said, would have been more honestly titled: *The Middle-Aged White Male Poets*) is that her poetry is so over the top, distinctive, alive, just that little bit mad, dizzyingly apt. It needs to be read in big juicy slabs rather than austere little bites. It’s not for tastings where you swirl a poem around then spit it out and go onto the next poet. It’s for the deep dive, the pig-out. Yet it’s lean poetry, you won’t get weighted down with all those serious meaningfuls that poetry is “supposed” to be about; death and co., esoteric references to predecessors, etc. — English Department fodder.

These are poems you want to quote rather than write about:

so now i have to pack my forests and baggages,
so now i have to pack my eagles and teardust,
and the way you talked to overflow,
and the way you were so fast to change
into your many shades of sorrow,
and the way you swept the miracles
away from your shabby gentility,
and the way you trembled
as you chose the latest props.

**so hello attache case face.**
**hello briefcase face.**
**hello screaming suitcase.**

("Leaving", p. 70)

This book, like Brown’s work as a poet, performer and filmmaker, spans the last decade and a half of urban fringe culture and the women’s movement in Australia. As Kate Jennings says in her lively introduction: “It is a fever-chart, an ECG of the times when the new feminism demolished the geography in our heads, blew up the bridges of retreat, and mined the way forward”. Reading them in the chronological order presented, one gets a sense of history without the poems being in any way severely dated. "700 teatowels marching backwards/ up lygon street", poems on the death of Neal Cassady and Janis Joplin, about drugs and booze and bohemians recreate a sense of the time and place and politics, but because the images and the phrases are her own and never the cliches and slogans and catchcries of the times, they are still fresh. Their muscles are still firm, they still come out fighting.

The poems are heavily laced with humour — cynical, indulgent, forgiving humour — without being trite. Without being devoid of warmth and emotion. It’s not so much that the “tough poet image” cracks, it unfolds. Inside is a complex emotional political still-growing world in which the people, mainly women, wear “the kind of shoes that being alive makes so dirty”, keeping a “wide angle on paradise.”

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