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Bestiary

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BESTIARY

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INTRODUCTION

It was a few poems into Bestiary when I began writing Psychic Photography. After the completion of Psychic Photography, I wrote Broken Land over a period of a few weeks. Psychic Photography took eight months whereas Bestiary, due to the amount of research involved and the separate identity of each of the individual poems, took about eighteen months. I needed to be working on these three books at the same time in order to break up the intensity, and relieve myself of the kind of concentration required for creative expression. When I am on a run I just allow myself to go with the flow of the book until it is finished. I am always working on a number of books at once, but now and again a particular book seems to suddenly come to life for me. The narrative element of the book Broken Land helped this ignition and acceleration. It was a book I had to write quickly without interruption. I was suddenly involved in it and then it was over. It’s a collection that I have a soft spot for. In comparison, Psychic Photography was a huge narrative that needed to be cut right down and reconstructed into what it has become. This book was originally four times its present length. Part of its intensity was gained by cutting it right down in order to find the poetry in the paragraph of prose. I could say that the poetry was the jewel in the cave of prose.

What makes these books unique as a triptych, is that I was working on them at around the same time. They were also my first planned books in a thematic sense. My previous three; In The Dog Box Of Summer, William’s Mongrels and How Do Detectives Make Love? were in no way planned. In The Dog Box Of Summer was simply a poet’s first collection, bright-eyed, a collation of ideas and a little shaky in parts. The second collection, William’s Mongrels is a more substantial. Already there is a sense of thematic
writing that begins to emerge. Although it was in no way a planned book, I wrote it whilst I travelled around Australia, so a lot of the poems were influenced by this journey. Nevertheless it was still fairly spontaneous in its construction, a book based on various states of inspiration. I was barely developing as a writer. That was in nineteen ninety-two. I'm thinking my God that trip was wasted. I'm wondering what kind of poetry I would write now, if I travelled right around Australia again. Then I guess in five years from now, I'll wonder what the hell I was writing on that trip.

The difference in a trip taken now would be that I would plan the trip beforehand and research the facts involving my chosen areas of interest. I would then combine this with serious exploration and document all the things I missed on that initial trip. I believe that through a general inability to cope that I was largely self-focused and would have missed a lot of things. Yet I suspect that this not knowing myself gave William’s Mongrels its energy, and perhaps the struggle to self-actualise gave this book its intensity and a feeling of exploration. I should accept that William’s Mongrels was a book of poetry written by myself at twenty-six and so move on. At twenty-seven I was writing my third book, How Do Detectives Make Love? This book was very spontaneous. The poems were erupting. It was very painful. I wrote it sitting cross-legged on the floor on a few cushions which were my bed at the time. This pressure would build up inside me and then I would almost be crying and then the electronic typewriter keyboard got a bashing.

The construction of books on a regular basis is my birth process. When my old high school girlfriend rings from Bathurst she sometimes says, ‘I’ve had another baby. Have you had any babies yet?’ She speaks as if I can just produce them as easily as washing the dishes. I reply, ‘I’ve written another two books,’ and that’s how the conversation goes. How Do Detectives Make Love? turned out to be thematic even though it was unplanned. This book was written during a very disruptive time in my life, an intense period of change. I had fallen in love for the first time, or at least I thought I had and I found that
quite a shock. I was also involved in the final stage of recovery from a long-standing illness that began in my early twenties. This recovery process involved a step back into a society that I had never truly conquered or felt I had been a part of. At first it felt like I was walking along sharp rocks protruding from a fast flowing stream with bare feet. This forceful sensation dragged the present back into my past. Thus I was experiencing a combination of past and present pain. The book *How Do Detectives Make Love?* is a painful one. I also became addicted to my own writing. I used my poetry in these three books to intoxicate myself, in order to escape pain as much as to express it.

The mass media has influenced my writing. Television, radio, box office movies and the constant presence of classical music featured in old black and white movies screened on a Saturday afternoon or a Friday night. I watched these movies as a child, and they stayed with me as a crude guide to my future creative expression. I began to experience and record environments like a director, which helped with the narrative aspects of the poetry. The classical music also helped me give a rhythm to my work. My family did not have books, nor were they cultured in any of the other conventional ways. From an early age I felt forced to live right out in the world, often without the correct defences needed in order to survive. This had the effect of sending me scurrying back into my internal world. Most cultural influences came from television and movies rather than books. Apart from the background classical music, this constant presence of electronic mass media included other influences, such as exaggerated speech and sense of purpose, and two-dimensional characters in repetitive and more than often, predictable story lines. It also included the speed, intensity and cutting process of advertising and time slotted programs. For me the experiential replaced the plot, which always seemed too convenient at the best of times.

One of the differences between my first three books and the three books that I will be discussing here, is that the latter were all written using a computer rather than an electronic typewriter. The speed of computer has been extremely beneficial to my way of
working, which often includes rapid drafting and re-drafting. It has also been good for working on multiple documents simultaneously. The computer sustains this way of working. It allows me to switch from one book to another with efficiency. It has allowed me to develop as a writer by being able to write quickly, and has increased my output to three times of what it originally was on an electronic typewriter. Since using it I have written on average three books a year. It doesn’t mean that I am rushing or that the quality is not there. What it suggests to me is a complex storehouse of information that must be constantly expressed. It simply speaks of material that needs to be written.

I will start off by talking about Psychic Photography, then Bestiary and finally Broken Land. The books are not really connected by the way I worked on them. Although they were written at the same time they are very different, in their ideas, content and structure.