

Reviews

***The Best Australian Poems 2005.* Ed. Les Murray. Melbourne:
Black Inc, 2005, 184pp.
AU \$24.95
ISBN: 1863951024**

***The Best Australian Poetry 2005.* Ed. Peter Porter. St Lucia, Qld.:
University of Queensland Press, 2005, 173pp.
AU \$22.95
ISBN: 0702235180**

It's agreed: the two "best" Australian poems published in 2005 were Judith Beveridge's "The Shark" and Craig Sherbourne's "Journo." These are the only poems common to both anthologies. You can see why they were selected:

Grennan jammed open the great jaws
and we saw how the upper jaw hung from
the skull. We flinched at the stench of blood . . . ("The Shark")

I wait for the dead to happen.
"That's why it's called a deadline,"
I yawn to the new girl,
like showing off a callous, a scar.
She frowns admiringly,
She's never seen a corpse but wants to. ("Journo")

The fourteen "best" Australian poets published in 2005 were, in addition to the two above, Bruce Beaver, MTC Cronin, Bruce Dawe, Stephen Edgar, Peter Goldsworthy, Jennifer Harrison, Clive James, John Jenkins, John Kinsella, Anthony Lawrence, Les Murray, Dorothy Porter and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. These poets have different (and stylish, exemplary—terrific)

poems in both anthologies. We could add Peter Porter to this list, since he modestly excludes himself from his own anthology, whereas Murray doesn't. Porter has a fine Introduction which mounts an argument about poetry: that it should "escape if not the fact, the editorial dominance, of the lyric." It includes a judicious discussion of individual poets as well as a sense of different groupings.

That said, these are both admirable volumes filled with impressive and moving poems. There are multiple pleasures in these texts—both immediate and dramatic gratifications. In Porter there is MTC Cronin's "Bottle-Brush":

Crimson toughs and woody squats
grouped along the flowering stem.
Pots from stoves aren't so bright!
I love the Medusa in you!

Or Anthony Lawrence's "Live Sheep Trade":

For *Shy Feeding Syndrome*, read death by starvation.
For *Scabby Mouth*, read beltings and dehydration.
The sun is a windlass the crew use
for lowering and applying heat treatment . . .

And in Murray there are the more attenuated nuances of unravelling layers, as in Jennifer Harrison's "The Lovely Utterly Cold Snow":

. . . here, the author's signature
is absurdly sought . . .
as though the empty page
requires its spoor of fame . . .

Or John Kinsella's "The Vital Waters":

And Ted Hughes with the Addenbrookes nurse,
so crucify me to the breast-milk-drinking master
bilingual in the oak closets,
oh Monsanto, Monsanto you're on the way out

Both books testify to the liveliness and variety of the enterprise of writing

poetry in Australia, even if both lament the more precarious publishing opportunities. Both are a testament to the world-class quality of Australia's multi-indigenous voices, marginalised by global political and economic agendas. Both editors are aware of the subjectivity of their "best" and sad about work they have excluded, but both celebrate the opportunity to foreground their particular tastes. We needn't be precious about our quibbles with "best"—I'm sure we could all imagine significant omissions and challenge particular inclusions. UQP and Black Inc. should both be commended for their sustained marketing strategy which continues to support poetry in such stylish volumes.

It's no new thing to have more than one "best of" in any year. I happen to have two 1958 "bests" on my shelves: one edited for Angus and Robertson by Vincent Buckley, the other "selected" for *Australian Letters* by Robert Clark, Geoffrey Dutton, Max Harris and Ian Mudie. There are four common poems (by Francis Webb, Tom Shapcott, Gwen Harwood and Mary Finnin) and nine other poets represented in both, of which Chris Wallace-Crabbe is also in our two current volumes—does that make him a kind of "best" anthologists' choice over the last half-century?

However, the differences between Porter's and Murray's selections, rather than their similarities, are most significant. Both collections are arguments about what is important in Australian poetry. These are the latest manifestation of a debate about Australian Literature articulated by Gerry Wilkes in his *Australian Literature: A Conspectus* (1978), echoing H. M. Green's *A History of Australian Literature* (1961) and commentators going back at least as far as A. G. Stephens and Marcus Clarke: the spread of British English into the Pacific, on the one hand, and the growth of local voices, on the other. It's also another instance of the traditional Boeotian Murray vs the Athenian Porter dualism, and continues debates about different kinds of authenticity in poetic inspiration and allusion: rural vs metropolitan, Dionysian vs Apollonian, and the like. Maybe here we have "neo" neo-classical vs "neo" Jindyworobak?

The Best Australian Poetry has 40 poets in 173 pages. After ruling out poems published overseas or by foreign poets, Porter still had "an embarrassment of riches" to work with. The UQP series editors, Bronwyn Lea and Martin Duwell, have included notes from each poet on their particular piece. As well, the volume publishes the 2006 winner of the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize (\$10,000), a longish (and darkly compelling) prose poem sequence by Chris

Fontana, “Husbandry” which should be listed in the Contents as it’s part of the volume’s nicely postmodern “best,” even if it’s not the editor’s “best.”

Murray’s “best” comprises 119 poets in 184 pages (do I hear “value for money!?”) with a brief introduction and no “space . . . wasted on biography or criticism” since:

The work is more important, and deserves to be seen as primary. Education and politics . . . have gone far to muffle and reduce poetry and turn readers off it by the millions. If we are ever to get many of those readers to come back to it as a major art form, they need to see and hear it as often as possible in its own right and its own space.

Does a poem have its own “right” or “space”? Surely not—this is something conferred by context or conventions of reading, utterance, publishing. Poems speak in a universe of discourse, often messily or elegantly bedight with baggage, and to publish a poem with no biographical information or notes could be said to abandon it to whatever context the reader’s mind supplies or denies. It’s arguable too, whether poems are “muffled” or promoted, enhanced, “created” even, by education and politics.

Unlike Porter, Murray received “about half of the poetry in this book . . . in submissions, via Black Inc. or sometimes directly. The rest came from as diligent a survey as I could make of recent magazines and published collections.” Two of the poets, Bruce Beaver and Mary Gilmore, are dead, the latter for more than 40 years—a playful and catholic culling (but see Jennifer Strauss’s review of Murray in the *Australian Book Review* of 2006).

Half of Porter’s selection is made up of long poems—an embodiment of his argument that poetry should be freed from the shackles of the lyric (see also David McCooey “Surviving Australian Poetry,” *Blue Dog* 4.7) in order to “claim back for poetry from prose some of its empowering scope and dramatic force.” Porter expresses his preference for thinking, Augustan, satirical but also avant-garde, intertextual, postmodern poems. He claims that J. S. Harry is “the most arresting poet writing in Australia today” and certainly her “Journeys West of ‘War’” from the longer sequence *Peter Henry Lepus in ‘Iraq’* is an astonishing, extended, surreal satire in which a “British rabbit though of Creole ancestry” is “looking for Professor Alfred Jules Ayer, / & a group of British / phenomenalist philosophers.” Playing with the idea of Australian explorer poems of the mid-twentieth century, having echoes of *Wind in the Willows*, conversations with eminent philosophers and

a huntsman spider with connections to the *Rubaiyat*, the poem trenchantly undercuts political stances on the USA invasion of Iraq. Rich, allusive and mind-stretching, this and the other long poem sequences by John Jenkins, John Kinsella and Fay Zwicky (as well as “Husbandry”) justify the claims made for them by Porter. These are radical and significant poems that need to be acknowledged, read and enjoyed.

Murray’s selection is dominated by the lyric: short poems, relying on a sense of emotion and delight as well as verbal felicity. His poems are an inclusive sampling from vernacular and local registers (see Anna Buck’s “Drum Roll” or Graham Rowlands’ “Bonking”) to more complex nuances (e.g., Peter Goldsworthy’s “Dog Day,” Alan Gould’s “Tears at the Merry Muse” or the cheeky sonnet “No Bed” by Melinda Smith). See also the first-rate work by Andrew Burke, Carolyn Fisher, Rod Moran, David Mortimer, Geoff Page, Josephine Rowe and Michael Sharkey.

Porter’s range is narrower but more intellectual and cultured (he values the “lapidary” quality of a poem) and with fewer vernacular voices. But even the internationally astute Jenkins and the conceptually sinuous Harry write in laconic dramatic monologues. Zwicky’s “Makassar 1956” is a poised, heartfelt, thoughtful meditation on growing up in and looking back at a migration journey. Kinsella—even in the play of allusive interstices of imagery shows a rush of conversational exuberance. As well, the poems by Jennifer Maiden and Peter Rose are coolly sinuous.

Murray’s anthology will surprise, delight, entertain—he has an unfailing eye for a good poem. Porter’s anthology will challenge, puzzle and irritate—as well as the above. I hope I don’t have to decide to take only one to my desert island. In a way it’s unfair to single out particular poems from such a rich and varied smorgasbord. Both have poems with clever ideas, elegant constructions, and some that just take my breath away.

As I write this last sentence Ron Pretty’s *The Best Poems of January 2006* arrives on my desk—a view from the Wollongong Poetry Workshop—another particular “best” to interrogate the mountain of bests.

David Gilbey, Charles Sturt University