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Verse novels in review

Anthony Lawrence, *The Welfare of My Enemy*
Puncher & Wattmann, 2012, 80 pp pb, ISBN 9781921450495, RRP \$24

Ali Cobby Eckermann, *ruby moonlight*
Magabala Books, 2012, 64 pp pb, ISBN 9781921248511, RRP \$27.95

In the past two decades, the verse novel has enjoyed an international renaissance, bolstered by heavyweight contributions by Derek Walcott, Vikram Seth and Anne Carson, and nowhere has it been more popular than Australia, where Les Murray's, Dorothy Porter's and Alan Wearne's classic contributions to the form are joined by more recent works by Geoff Page, Paul Hetherington, Judy Johnson, and many others. It would be interesting to speculate about what precisely has driven this peculiarly antipodean interest in the form—perhaps it is a remnant of the relatively strong historical tradition of narrative poetry and balladry in this country—but what is clear is that the verse novel's popularity among Australian poets continues unabated.

The most frequent complaint leveled at the verse novel is that it fails to either be wholly satisfying as a novel or as poetry. Its strange and often ill-fitting marriage of lyrical intensity and imagism with characterisation, plot, and the other trappings of fiction offers the poet a difficult balancing act: poems must maintain the narrative interest and momentum of a novel via the compressed and distilled unit of the poetic line. It is a rare verse novel that can keep those two competing demands on an even keel; most often, either the narrative drive or the poetic craft suffers. Curiously, the two works under review here, Anthony Lawrence's *The Welfare of My Enemy* and Ali Cobby Eckermann's *ruby moonlight*, are more successful for *not* trying to attempt all the crisis and catharsis we might expect from a novel: impressionistic, quick-paced and mosaic in approach, these two works sit, one feels, in a genre of their own.

Lawrence's decision to write a verse novel will come as little surprise to readers familiar with his oeuvre. Since the long poem "Blood Oath" in *Three Days Out of Tidal Town*, tracing the death by exposure of two jackaroos, Lawrence has revealed a lasting interest in narrative poems, voice and vernacular; his 2002 novel, *In the Half Light*, was notable for, among other things, its lyrical and forceful narration of its protagonist James's disoriented and fractured psyche ("I crossed over the Bay of Dislocation into the Straits of Disembodiment. My head was scooting around in dusklight on a small island, telling its own story to the resident gulls."). Lawrence's new verse novel, *The Welfare of My Enemy*, dwells in similarly fraught and emotionally-charged territory; its subject is the phenomenon of missing persons. As the book's press release reveals, this phenomenon has a personal dimension for Lawrence, who experienced the unsolved disappearance of two friends in the 1970s, whose disappearances were eventually ruled as death by misadventure.

The Welfare of My Enemy is in many ways an unconventional verse novel. While Lawrence employs rhyming and half-rhyming couplets in rough pentameter throughout, giving the poems a coherent feel, he eschews many other familiar tropes of the genre. Rather than relying on recurring or identifiable characters, or using titles to give a shorthand insight into the speaker's identity or emotional state, Lawrence divides his poems by asterisks, making no other attempt to identify the poems' speakers. Making sense of each new poem is an act of deduction for the reader, who must ascertain who is speaking the poem, and to whom. The poems are spoken variously by all the entities involved in missing persons cases, from police investigators, family and friends left behind and the missing themselves, to cadaver dogs and the perpetrators of crimes against the missing. Consequently, the poems maintain a kind of anonymity: few details are included, and rather than following a contained crime narrative with killers, victims, and tidy solutions at the close, Lawrence instead chooses to focus on the more general experience of those grappling with disappearances.

Individual poems are marked, as one might expect from Lawrence, by their superb naturalistic detail and their finely drawn images: in one, clouds are "like the scales of reef fish"; in another, yellow police tape is "strung like old sunlight around the trees." Yet unlike Lawrence's work in recent books, where an almost rhapsodic convergence of human apprehension and the natural world has predominated, the poems in *The Welfare of My Enemy* are more interested in a largely human drama, where the psychic states of human actors preside. The poems often adopt a clipped, and even didactic, tone that resembles police reports, as in the abecedarian "A man is not listed as missing":

A man is not listed as missing, though he's been gone
By all accounts, for twenty years. It's been so long

Children don't say his name or try to find him.
Dad is not a word they use. His absence is a thin

Erratic line through the years. At five, his own
Father left, and never returned. Call it a pattern.

Some of the strongest and most disturbing poems in the book deal with the psyche of the murderer, where Lawrence's rhyme scheme and rough pentameter contribute to the brutally closed logic of the couplets:

I've heard them calling for mother and Christ.
One thought he was a fucking resurrectionist

Said, "come on then, do it, I'm ready, and I'll return
and you'll be sorry." These people never learn.

I did what he wanted. He kneeled. I put him down.
That was what? Ten years ago? Clown.

Among these anonymous voices, however, small details of a repeating missing persons

narrative is exposed, wherein “two people, a lime-green van, on their way / from one how to another” disappear and are never seen again. One suspects from the context given by the book’s press release that these may be the real-life friends who prompted Lawrence’s personal interest in the phenomenon, but like all the other characters who surface in *The Welfare of My Enemy*, no particular solutions or conclusions arrive for the couple, and the poems shy away from imagining or inventing possible endings. As soon as the poet is tempted to speculate, as in “A North Shore suburb”, about what may have happened after

...they vanished, as if the earth itself has inter-
vened to seal them away. Death by misadventure

or abduction, deprivation, murder? Who did they encounter
where streetlights and house lights no longer

mark the way?

he almost immediately turns to considering *who* may be responsible, rather than the details of the crime itself:

At the time they went missing, a now-convicted serial killer

was active in the area. A council worker
on the roads, he would have known where

tracks begin and end, and whether
they were being used. Despite being marked Never

To Be Released, he’s not confessed...

This turn is characteristic of the poems in *The Welfare of My Enemy*, which veer from voice to anonymous voice, never coming to rest or forming full conclusions. While this approach may withhold some of the more familiar pleasures of the traditional crime narrative, it gives a more haunted, incomplete and possibly more accurate sense of the unsettling world of missing persons, where, as one poem tells us, left “alone, we endure a private madness.”

Ali Cobby Eckermann’s *ruby moonlight* is, like Lawrence’s verse novel, unorthodox in some of its strategies and likewise stronger for it. *ruby moonlight* charts the massacre, circa 1880, of a Ngadjuri Aboriginal family as negotiated by sole survivor Ruby, a young woman who strikes up a pragmatic but ultimately fraught relationship with a European pelt-trapper, Jack, who is in competition with an old dancer for Ruby’s affections. Told in revolving third-person perspective, the poems focus on the difficulties of Ruby and Jack’s relationship and the condemnation they receive from both suspicious town-folk and from other Aboriginal tribes. Unlike *The Welfare of My Enemy*, *ruby moonlight* is intended to be read as a chronological narrative with identifiable characters, yet I was pleasantly surprised to discover that so many of the poems in the collection read

convincingly (as do Lawrence's) as stand-alone poems. Eckermann's verse novel also gestures towards broader ideas about colonialism's hierarchies and power structures, and its lingering historical impact on the first peoples of this country, on language, and on the very landscape itself. One of the most remarkable things about *ruby moonlight* is the subtlety with which its political implications are handled: Eckermann invites (rather than dictates) political readings of what is, at heart, a simple and highly engaging narrative.

Perhaps the most immediately striking feature of Eckermann's poems is the impressive condensation of imagery they achieve. An early poem, "Smoke", describes the moment when Ruby first encounters Jack, the trapper, with haiku-like economy and precision:

from within the wattle brush hide
she observes a smoking ash ghost

it is tall like emu
its face galah pink

seemingly oblivious to the rain
it emits the strange odour

how can it smoke fire
breathe smoke from its mouth

maybe it is a fire man
maybe the rain is putting it out

like water
on hot coals

Yet, as with the best haiku, this seeming simplicity belies a great sophistication. Eckermann's images are controlled, concise, and convey the shock of two languages and cultures abutting each other with inventive abbreviation. Jack's otherness—his clothes, his pink skin, the smoke from his pipe—are rendered via the animals and objects of Ruby's frame of reference, producing a superb and surreal set of imagery that drives, via balanced couplets, to the lovely last image of water dousing coals. Time and again, the poems display a gift for imagery: in "Loose", Jack drinks in the pub where "froth shampoos his new-grown beard / [and] the beer tastes like liquid gold"; in "Detour", he visits a village to sell pelts, passing "wattle and daub shacks" where "eyes peer from curtains"; and in the superb "Birds", one of the stand-out poems in the book, Ruby walks where "honeyeaters flit the route to sweet grevillea / [and] owls nest in her eyes". The most notable feature of Eckermann's imagery is its supreme control: the poet never overplays the image, but is consistently confident to let short and unelaborated images stand on their own.

While Eckermann clearly revels in the imaginative and transformative powers of language, she is also attuned to its destructive capacities, as in "Merger", where we learn Ruby is "glad Jack is / a man of few words", as "it is forbidden for Europeans / to

fornicate with blacks.” The Latinate “fornicates” leaps out with its prejudicial tones and its prudery; it is a word that Jack, in his illiteracy, would not use, but its implications for both Jack and Ruby are clear. Later, in “Caution”, we learn that “*abo lovers* are despised in these parts”, and in “Visitor”, Jack is confronted by a passing carriage at his and Ruby’s camp, where he is told by men who “touch hats in silent greeting”:

we need ya help mate
the words hang on reality without suspense
there’s sickness going on cross the river

Jack knows the remainder of the conversation
before it was spoke *ya see any blacks roaming*
best ya kill ’em disease spreading pests

But it is not only outsiders who impose linguistic divisions and hierarchies on Jack and Ruby; they, too, are divided by language, as we learn in “Oasis”: “neither know / the other’s language // they never speak during the day”. At the beginning of their relationship, their slow courtship begins with gestures, not words, as when Ruby leaves a gift of birds’ eggs and dead echidna at Jack’s campfire, and Jack introduces her to sugar. One of the strengths of Eckermann’s novel is the ambiguity and complexity of Jack and Ruby’s relationship; it is mutual, clearly, and borne from an admixture of mutual attraction, circumstance and interdependence, but marked from the outset as a difficult union that can only exist in “the oasis of isolation”. Once that isolation is broken—by both European and Aboriginal intruders—the result is an equally complicated dissolution brought on by a combination of obligations, racial and linguistic divides and social pressures.

Like Lawrence’s *The Welfare of My Enemy*, Eckermann’s *ruby moonlight* is more moving and haunting for the conclusions it withholds. Some recent additions to the genre have too fully revealed and dramatised their intentions; it was a pleasure and relief to encounter these two fragmentary works, both comfortable to inhabit ambiguity and to leave the unsaid unsaid.