

JUDGE'S REPORT NEW POETS 21

Friendly Street Poets

Kaye Aldenhoven

Nineteen collections of poetry were submitted. Every collection had a poem that I wished I had written. Some were heart-breakingly beautiful. Some were heart-breaking.

Poetry is, to quote my English Teacher at Woodville High School “the most perfect speech of Man,” (*we were a class of 40 young ladies*). I’ve held this ideal in mind for 60+ years. Many of these poems met these high expectations. Proof plenty that South Australian poetry is thriving.

I have never met any of these South Australian poets, never listened to their words in their own voices, never heard the stress and cadence they had intended. My eyes and my inner ears had to do this process, because to me, sound is an important element of poetry.

I enjoyed the reading process, all 500 pages, but making judgments was multi-faceted and challenging. Much harder than comparing clichéd apples with citrus fruit. Opening documents, looking at poems, I had to consciously put aside my editing skills, and my concepts of print aesthetics, and disregard my notions of spelling, grammar, punctuation and format, to weigh the flesh of the poetry, to assess value.

After all, the three collections will have an experienced editor, and a designer will layout the book elegantly. Each collection had some stunning poems, so consistency of quality was a criterion. How could I balance goodness with another expression of goodness? Reading, reading aloud, reading again. Contrast and compare, resolve contradictions. Read the poems again.

I chose three manuscripts and ranked them alphabetically, cowardly relieved that I did not have to choose between them to rank a first, a second and a third. So, alphabetically:

Take My Words For It by Doug Jaquier

Odds and Sods by Tarla Kramer

Copy of Poets by Mark Ritchie

Highly Commended: When We Were Sixteen by Megan Clark

Tarla Kramer’s Odds and Sods, with the self- demeaning title, is a set of nicely crafted poems, marked by a mischievous humour and with a comforting underlay of practical philosophy, based on what may seem mundane experiences –Exeloo is an example.

*Stepping inside in a panic
after the door takes its sweet time to open
then waiting for it to close behind me
The release of tension when the male voice
which has an American accent even though it’s from NZ
says door locked*

*Sitting there indefinitely
being sung to
while outside is chaos*

I was captivated by the way she takes mundane stuff and shapes it to an image I will remember indelibly. In Can Man, a worker with a stinking job and a propensity to chatter, communicates his disgust and, unexpectedly, his compassion :

*six bags of drowned kittens/
in bins this evening
as if to say it is not him that stinks.*

Mark Ritchie's collection, Copy of Poets is a song of praise to poets and New Zealand, though I admire his poem Coober Pedy on an Evening of Russian Poetry. Many of his finely-crafted poems address catastrophe:

Christchurch earthquake:

*the bedrock of the city blench and quail
from its wounds pour moiling and viscid silt,
smells not of roses. Like congealed mucus,
marly and ichorous. Wounds that may never heal.*

flood *rain bible thick*

Christchurch massacre - the anger and anguish in Questions remain, 15th March 2019.

*I hear the heartbreak
I hear the pain
I hear the anger
I barely recognise
my Mother's voice.*

Kia kaha.

Coronavirus is worded starkly and simply and powerfully:

*Today I captured your smile,
placed it in a glass bottle,
stored it on the shelf of memories.
Because we are going need it
later on.*

Doug Jaquier has written Take My Words For It, a set of complex poems which address current issues. Domestic violence and its effect through generations, and disillusionment with our youthful ideals are some of the concerns Jaquier deals with impressively. The uncaring, destructive way our society rears our sons and our brothers, is the subject of Cut Me.

*the matriarch unfolds a pattern
and, with skills both ancient and subtle,
draws to her strands unknitted,
in case they ever unravel
and pull the fabric apart.*

Love and loss are close and personal and heart-breakingly true in the fine poem Now that you are gone

*the cruelty is ended.
You, the speaker of many truths,
are no longer taunted
by a tongue in twisted battle
with a mind no less sharp
and arms no less caring
that could not be raised in love.*

Megan Clark's is a courageous collection. I highly commend When We Were Sixteen. I liked these poems a lot. They are deceptively simple stories of friends and family. But they are much more than that. Clark's poetry will not be published in New Poets 21, so I must share Nana with you. This poem gives a glimpse of the loss to Indigenous families and communities caused by colonisation.

Nana

Maybe Nana
Was Adnyamathanha
The people of the rock
North of Port Augusta.
When I saw her
On the bus
Her face was as
Hard as a rock.

Maybe Nana
Was Nakunu
My mum was born in Port Pirie.
They are the Assassins
And Nana's stare was sharp
It went straight through me.
Then my school friends didn't believe me.
It was as if I wasn't there.

Maybe Nana
 Was Kurna
 The teachers.
 From here.
 I am a learner.
 “My mum never loved me, she put me in a home,”
 On Tarndanyangga, Whitmore Square.

My mum didn't know why she was there
 Nana never told her
 And she never said a word to me.

Maybe Nana
 Was Spanish
 Like she always said
 And golden syrup dumplings and curried eggs
 Are from Barcelona or Madrid.
 Or maybe there's Irish
 That's why I break into song
 But that could be from a Ngarrindjeri Nana
 From the Coorong
 Or my own home
 From my own mum.

And it goes on.

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I thank Nigel Ford and the FSP committee that gave me the selection task.
 I thank the poets who bravely submitted their words for judgement. Please don't be discouraged. If I was a Fairy Godmother I would publish lots of your poems, so keep writing. Keep being an active voice in your poetry loving community.
 I eagerly await my copy of your New Poets 21.

Thank you all
 Well done all
 Congratulations all
 Good Luck all