

## Launch for Joan Fleming 17/11/11

Good evening. It's a very great pleasure to be asked to say a few words about Joan Fleming's highly distinctive first collection of poems, *The Same As Yes* - before Joan gives us a short reading.

I first got to know Joan in 2005 when she took my Creative Non-Fiction class at the IIML, CREW 257. And I thought I might begin by briefly referring to the excellent portfolio she produced for that course. Her portfolio contained two pieces. One was memorably entitled 'Worth Her Weight in Pigs'. This imaginatively recreated her mother's time working as a doctor in PNG and reflected on some of the cultural practices and differences which had confronted her mother. The other piece, 'Dukka Bums', with its titular nod to Kerouac, and prefaced by a parodic Shakespearean sonnet, described a tricky tramping trip Joan had recently taken with an old friend visiting from the States. Both pieces were subtle, perceptive and well-written in a realist mode but neither remotely prepared me for this arresting collection of poems with its disconcerting face-shifting cover.

To enter these poems is like entering into a dream. By that, I don't mean that the poems themselves are at all dreamy or vague or like those old-fashioned TV sequences where the screen suddenly goes all rippling and fuzzy to let us know that we are now in a dream or in a scene remembered from the past. I mean that the world of the poems is like a dream world in the way in which everything that happens in dreams is very precise and direct. What happens has an inner logic to it, an inner coherence, which while the dream continues you just accept but which if you try to reconstruct after you've woken up is hard to make sense of. And dreams, as we gappily recall them, are often full of narrative shards, snippets of speech,

surreal detail. It is no accident that several of the characters in *The Same As Yes* are dreaming or tell their dreams.

One analogy that occurred to me several times while reading and rereading these poems was with movies like Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* or *La Belle et La Bête*. Cocteau films have a similar combination of the precise and the uncanny, the ordinary treated as extraordinary and the extraordinary treated as ordinary, the filmic equivalent of juxtaposing different styles and registers. So be prepared here for titles like 'Storybook Talking to the Small Girl at the Bottom of the Garden' or 'Chalk Talks to the Chalkboard' or 'He and She Talk a Sweet Violence over Dinner'. As these and many of the other titles suggest, there seems a great emphasis on talking in these poems – most of which are prose poems. But quite what is being talked about and why is often left to us to try to work out. And, in fact, as much as talking, we are often aware of the difficulties of communicating. One poem is called 'Fifteen-Year-Old Boy Talks in his Broken Voice'. This begins in a way not just mothers can empathise with: "Boys this age speak in a language that frightens their mothers. Their hootings unleash a green, hairy man; their *don'ts* and *whys* are tupperware containers full of whinge." This is wittily observed and neatly metaphorically turned but you could also see the idea of the 'broken voice' as a recurrent feature and one applicable not just to the human characters like the mother here or the girl, aunt or the lovers elsewhere.

Because, as you can tell from those earlier titles I mentioned, many of the characters here are not human beings but objects. And what we are offered is the world as objects might be imagined to experience it and experience themselves, puzzling away, as we do, at their nature, their function, their identity. So here is one of my favourites, 'Dressing Gown Talking to Itself' (the colour 'blue', incidentally, is a repeated motif):

What woman belongs in me? What concave, secret hive was I made to cinch in—  
missing, here, on the clothes hanger, where all I am is folds and empty space.

Ownership, I think, is not the same as belonging. You can own a forest of clothes,  
a warehouse full of plates and bowls in boxes, and always drink from the same blue  
favourite cup. A woman has to love a thing to belong to it, to look forward to its  
feeling, to whisper its secret name, as she slips inside.

This could be merely fanciful, even whimsical, yet that isn't, I think, the effect at all. Quite  
the contrary. We find ourselves suddenly seeing things from a dressing-gown's point of view  
and reflecting on what it means to own and to be owned, to belong and to belong to. The  
effect is unsettling, refreshing and oddly moving.

This other world, this world through the mirror, is sometimes joyful but is often a vulnerable  
world, a world at risk, as in 'Chalk Talks to the Chalkboard' where the chalkboard is "only a  
mute slate for instruction, by chalk as white as a teacher's tooth. Soon, the chalkboard's face  
is a palimpsest of punishment lines: *I will not, I will not, I will not*, over and over."

There is something very special about a first volume of poems for both the writer and for its  
first readers. So I hope that Joan savours this moment like the woman in 'Of Cloud and  
Movement' who is described as "in raptures of grapeskin and waterspout" and that you will  
savour this moment too, as you prepare to buy and read these precise, absorbing, slant poems.

Harry Ricketts