

**Linda Weste. *The Verse Novel: Australia & New Zealand*.
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This book comprises interviews with thirty-five authors of verse novels, from both Australia and New Zealand, including with Linda Weste, the editor. The interviews pose the same nine set questions to these writers. Questions like: “What ideas or influences did you have in mind when creating this work?” and “How did you approach writing this verse novel? What were the various stages in its development?” and “What are your thoughts on the verse novel as a form?” Such an approach has an unfortunate sense of the bot interview about it, but the writers respond in their different, individual ways, sometimes quite openly about influences and models, sometimes avoiding much mention of them, sometimes quoting from their own work. They are mostly very candid about their writing processes (and problems) and about the narrative sources of their work.

The writers represent a range of the different subgeneric traditions within the verse novel, a number, like Steven Herrick, Lorraine Marwood, Pip Harry, Sally Murphy, and Melissa Bruce, from within the YA space. Steven Herrick, a successful prize and grant winner, is an important figure here—he’s the first interviewee in the book and therefore sets the tone—with twelve verse novels for children and young adults to his name. Herrick confides that his “affection for multiple first-person narrators” has driven all of his verse novels. They’re “democracies,” he says, where “each character can be given equal weight and be able to tell their own story” (3). He also confesses that he always has “a theme or subject matter” he wants to discuss” (like homelessness, for example) and that the “poetic” dimension is subservient to the telling of a good story through authentic voices (5). This approach leads to his response to the question “What have you learnt about writing verse novels from the verse novels you have read?” that there is “a conflict in every verse novel—is it poetry or narrative, and the verse novels where the author is aware of the tension and weight of both strategies appeal to me the most” (8).

This question about the tensions or contradictions at the heart of the verse novel is in fact the meta-subject of this volume, addressed by all the interviewee-writers and considered at length by Weste in her introduction. Was there ever a genre more beset by doubts about its own purpose and design? Evidently it’s a generative aspect of the genre. The verse novel’s close relative, the long poem, more longstanding of course, shares some of these formal and existential questions but more in the mode of critical discussion and interest—epic, serial or meditative?—rather than in terms of a potentially debilitating incompatibility—narrative or poetic? As the editor Linda Weste argues, the problems begin with nomenclature, where “verse novels may not be readily identifiable in the marketplace, or the archive” (xvi). Does the genre exist? A verse novel may be “designated only by its form, or mode, or by its relation to other genres or subgenres, thus *Aurora Leigh* is a “blank verse Bildungsroman,” Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* is a “a postcolonial epic,” and [Dorothy Porter’s] *The Monkey’s Mask* is “an Erotic Murder Mystery” (xvi). A problem for bookshop shelving. The problem also extends to the listing of verse novels in library catalogues, as in the National Library of Australia for example, where three of ten titles are “designated with other “Form/genre” categories—none of which are “Novels in Verse,” even though one is explicitly subtitled in that way (xvi–xvii).

But it gets worse, for the authors themselves, if not for their works, when it comes to literary prizes, important cultural institutions for working writers. The problem is the varying generic definitions of literary prizes: “by virtue of its complement of poetic and narrative elements,” Weste writes, “a verse novel may be eligible for entry into awards and prizes

through either the poetry category, or the novel category” (xviii). It’s not straightforward, as the instances Weste quotes of Les Murray’s *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* and *Fredy Neptune* illustrate, winners of a poetry prize and a fiction prize, respectively. But Weste’s sense is that “verse novels are in fact starting to make new inroads into awards and prizes that bypass the binary of choosing either the poetry category or the fiction/novel category” (xviii). This point about the institutional valency of a literary genre is strangely two-edged: contemporary writers of verse novels are making headway against prize administration and publishing inflexibility about generic categories, while world classics like Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate* stand as spectacularly attractive models of the verse novel form. John Jenkins, one of the interviewees here, and the author of *A Break in the Weather*, a verse novel about climate change, for example, cites Ariosto’s 1516 verse epic, *Orlando Furioso* (1516) as directly influential in both verse form (ottava rima) and narrative techniques.

Lorraine Marwood views the local anti-generic establishment elements of the verse novel as a positive, peculiarly Australian, thing: “there is a freshness in the verse novel format,” she writes, “breathing space, anticipation and using words to flesh-out characters and emotions in a sparing way” (15). Typically, Brian Castro, in his interview is improvisatory, as well as luminously contrarian, about these questions: “I’m rather sceptical of generic fixations. Some writers define them to protect their turf. Poetry is not an angelic art-form, nor is prose a prosaic or monetary enterprise” (69). His assertion about the verse novel is even more provocative, he thinks of it as the “great enemy of story-telling” (69). Many of his verse novel colleagues would find this outrageous. But he means it positively, “it returns the reader to rhythms and presences and to the archaeology of words. It slows down time through compression and storage. It brings back enrichment to a literature which seems to have been degraded by Story” (69). So the verse novel is the antithesis of the “industry” novel, which perhaps explains some of its problems with publishers.¹ It may sound like it but for Castro narrative is not missing from the verse novel, as it might be in a lyric poem that is all rhythm and presence, but it is the poetic that is dominant. You can easily forgive him the antagonism of his rhetoric for the imagism of his formal thinking: for him the verse novel is like a painting by Magritte, “a landscape painted on a jail wall which one can step out of” (71).

The interview with John Newton is particularly interesting, not least because of his brilliant verse novel *Escape Path Lighting* of 2020. That work imagines a Hauraki Gulf island community of creative writing teachers, psychoanalysts, musicians, composers, stoners, medicos, elderly bikers, yoga teachers, herbalists and hospitality workers. He says that he wanted the book to be “as novel-like as possible: not just a sequence of connected poems, but plot-driven, with a large cast of characters” (126). The story, though, is governed by its “stanza form”: three acts of six chapters in loose blank verse in a “kind of exhibitionist verbal comedy” (126–27). The two plot lines involve the writing of a long poem by the poet Arthur Bardruin whose subject is giving up writing poetry, and a narratively complex story of a psychoanalytic therapy. Part of the exuberance of the writing is the result of what Newton describes as the initial impulse of the work, a “more-or-less genial polemic against the technocratic, anti-Romantic attitudes that ‘creative writing’ discourse encourages” (125). Thus, Newton evokes the model of Mozart’s comedies (*Così fan tutte*, *The Marriage of Figaro*) with their enclosure of “absurdity, irony, farce, and the most grievous lyricism” in the same theatrical space, for his own “rococo tragedy” (128). He is unequivocal about the “artificiality” of the verse novel form, and, as it happens, about the nature of poetry, and its attractions: the “moment you resort to verse any story you’re telling is explicitly denaturalized. To put it over-simply, life doesn’t rhyme. ‘Real life’ reaches all the way to the right-hand margin” (128). Newton is well aware how contrary to the powerful ideology of realist literary representation the verse novel is, it’s “perverse,” “foolish, eccentric, contrived” (129). There is also an important trans-Tasman

aspect to the “faux-Seventies” atmosphere of Newton’s verse novel, with its origins in the influence of John Tranter’s *The Floor of Heaven*.

Jordie Albiston’s interview provides another indicator of the variety and innovation of the Australian verse novel, with its thinking about her work in documentary mode, or the verse biography. Albiston’s *The Hanging of Jean Lee*, tells the story of the last woman hanged in Australia, in 1951, for a conviction for murder. It was a project that involved research into police reports, court documents and prison records, but also listening to 1940s radio programs to “emulate the music and ‘speak’ of the era” (171). The point, for Albiston, is the alternative version of stories from history and newspapers that the verse biography can offer. And the compelling influence for Albiston was William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, which she refers to as the verse biography of a township, “an astonishing and poetically-charged scramble of fragments, elocution and demotic, misspelling and dispelling that returns ever greater prizes for the re-reading” (173). So documentary verse biography offers the possibility of “artistic liberty,” particularly linguistic and formal liberty, with factual reality and its archival traces. This liberty was extended, in the case of *The Hanging of Jean Lee*, to its transformation into a musical, performed at the Sydney Opera House in 2006.

In his interview Alan Wearne focuses on his long verse novel of 2004, *The Lovemakers* rather than his earlier verse novels *Out Here* (1997) or *The Nightmarkets* (1987). There is no documentary impulse here, but rather speculations about voice and address. Wearne’s great model is Browning, oddly little mentioned by the other writers in their interviews, from whom he learns the “mighty potent” concept of “a speaker addressing someone and the reader/listener standing in for that someone,” like the anonymous person the Duke speaks to in “My Last Duchess” (266). Wearne’s way of talking about the verse novel is untroubled by its dichotomous nature, the poetry is “both in charge of, yet also serving the narrative, the verse novelist must be a poet first. Otherwise write in prose” (271). In fact, he thinks of the verse novel as more accurately termed “narrative verse, including monologues and dramatic monologues” which includes the verse novels of the Victorians Clough, Meredith and Browning. He also has a view about the genre more generally: the “verse novel is the domain of poets, not novelists” (272). And he sees the genre as having enjoyed a “celebrity” era, which is perhaps on the wane. Wearne has a disarming sense of literary history, the jury is out, he thinks, on the fate of “late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century verse novels” which might go the way of nineteenth-century verse drama. Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, and others, he writes, each tried their hand at the form, in imitation of the Elizabethans and Jacobean, “and where did it get them?” (272). Wearne also expresses a view that his fellow verse novelists would probably agree with: “the rules of verse novels, if they exist, are still fluid; no-one I’m sure really knows what a verse novel is, and let’s hope it stays that way” (273). As an instance of the genre’s astonishing adaptability he cites James Cummins’s 2002 *The Whole Truth*, a Perry Mason saga “re-told in a ludicrously surreal way in a series of sestinas” (273). A chapter of Wearne’s *The Lovemakers* about a QC called Cross consists of three villanelles. Cummins’s book is in the Carnegie Mellon Classic Contemporary series.

Leni Shelton’s intriguing account of the writing of her verse novel about Bertha Strehlow, *Walking with Camels: The Story of Bertha Strehlow* also identifies the excitement of the verse novel genre in its “versatility and flexibility” (71). She recounts her research in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs and the importance of place to her writing: “I know the landscape of Central Australia intimately and wrote about it from a place of knowledge” (75). Like Jordie Albiston she was writing about the life of a real person, but within a defining and distinctive historical context. Bertha Strehlow also published her own writing about her travels through the Petermann Ranges in 1936 (in *Walkabout* and the *Royal Geographical Society of Australasia Proceedings*). Shelton recalls working beside John Strehlow, who was

researching and writing a biography of his paternal grandmother Frieda Strehlow, in the Strehlow Research Centre. This led to John Strehlow giving Shelton a folder of his mother's letters written between 1942 and 1955 and "that gave me the opportunity to hear her voice" (75). For Shelton the resources of poetic language—"distillation of imagery and . . . sentences that give maximum emotional impact with the least amount of words" (78)—serve the primary purpose of the narrative, which is the depiction of character.

Linda Weste begins her introduction to these interviews with a reference to the growth in the publication of verse novels since the 1980s in the Children's, Young Adult and Adult categories. This classificatory perspective is the result of publishing and marketing discourse and is designed to guide readerships, even though it actually refers to the protagonists and social worlds of the verse novels' characters (YA = adolescent). Weste also spends time talking about the regional connections of the verse novel, including the disparity between Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand production. There are interviews with Aotearoa New Zealand writers John Newton, Mark Pirie, Diane Brown, Gregory O'Brien, Sherryl Clark, and Jennifer Compton, although the last two live in Australia and are thought of as Australian writers. Nevertheless, Weste's historical sense of a trans-Tasman "linked tradition" is worth noting as she cites influential connections between Gregory O'Brien, John Newton, and Dorothy Porter as well as between Mark Pirie and the work of Alan Wearne. Although it is the individual national genealogies that are perhaps more important. The nexus of Albert Wendt's *The Adventures of Vela*, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's *Maori Battalion: A Poetics Sequence* and Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld* is as distinctive to Aotearoa New Zealand poetics as are the verse novels of Sally Morgan (*Sister Heart*), Ali Cobby Eckermann (*Ruby Moonlight*) and Kirili Saunders (*Bindi*) to Australian First Nations poetics. While she acknowledges their work, it is unfortunate that Weste was unable to include interviews with Morgan, Eckermann or Saunders, who would no doubt have provided important perspectives on the social and historical sources and contexts of their verse narratives. As important would be their reflections on the formal attributes of their choice of narrative poetry. One critic, for example, observes the way in which Eckermann's spare, precise language enacts a complex and countervailing narrative about colonial, racist violence: "*Ruby Moonlight* is not a tale haunted by the nightmares of history; it is the story of a woman who wakes up from these nightmares."²

This collection of interviews will be of especial interest to teachers and students of Creative Writing. It provides insights into the work of writers in an unstable and developing genre and their engagements with both the institutions of publishing and readership. The editor, Linda Weste, may be more interested in the workings of prize committees and publishing and library categorisations of verse novels, but the writers themselves have much to say about their thinking about narrative, characterisation and language. And anyway, the genre of the writer-interview has its own fascination and impact.

Philip Mead, University of Western Australia

NOTES

1 See Ben Etherington. "The Brain Feign: *All That I Am* by Anna Funder." *Sydney Review of Books*, January 28, 2013: <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/the-brain-feign/>.

2 Ali Alezedah. "Poetry: Two New Long Poems." *Overland*. 13 June, 2012: <https://overland.org.au/2012/06/two-new-long-poems/>.