

James Laidler, *The Taste of Apple* (Interactive Press, 2010).

There is more than one way to experience *The Taste of Apple*. James Laidler's debut verse novel is available as an ebook, paperback and enhanced audio CD.

It is an ambitious and accomplished work and is the fruit of a lengthy creative process. The audio CD was produced by musician Don Stewart at Unmuzzled Studios in Victoria, with most of the lyrics written by Laidler, and most of the music composed by Stewart. It contains thirteen very carefully selected tracks that capture and dramatise the essence of the story portrayed in the verse novel. It is possible to absorb the beat and atmosphere of the whole by choosing, first, to listen to these tracks independent of the text.

The audio tracks might be said to represent the core of the novel. Although there is only a small selection of poems set to music, they have been carefully chosen so as to convey the central story. The enhanced CD version ebook includes a link out to the audio version of featured poems. However, it is necessary to have the CD loaded, whereas the ebook can be saved as a pdf file and read independently of the CD.

Track one, 'Breathe', is instantly engaging. It begins with the sound of a regular heart-beat that you can almost imagine is your own. Within seconds it is lifted by a cleanly picked riff, accompanied by breathing, distant sirens and general street ambience. Then moves into a catchy bass line that introduces the spoken word delivery. Words set the scene. The speaker balances on the rooftop edge of a high rise apartment building, 22 storeys above the street below. It feels like a ritual; a reconnection with life, through risk; staring down at the river of headlights below, the stars above. The musical transitions reflect and complement the poetic expression perfectly.

There is the option of reading the words as you listen, but I recommend listening to the complete audio CD in one sitting at some point. The paperback is beautifully bound and substantial with its 319 pages. Read the ebook on your computer screen; take the paperback on the train with you, or to bed. It's not clear if the ebook is readable on a mobile device, so check with the publisher.

Pedro is the central character of *The Taste of Apple*. Born to a Filipino mother and an Australian father who abandons the family, for a farm near Colac, on Christmas Day. Both the audio tracks and the text exude emotions – anger, love, joy, fear; the remnants of racial bullying; the lethargy of apartment life in a concrete jungle.

The narrative includes scenes from Pedro's life as a ten-year-old at primary school and at home, as well as scenes from early adolescence and young adulthood. During his adolescent years, Pedro and his mother are forced to leave the family's rented home at Heidelberg following the breakup of his parents' marriage. Their new home in Richmond is the housing commission apartment block Eden Towers. Pedro's elder sister has left home to go fruit-picking, and his mother now relies solely on him to help her fill out forms and deal with Centrelink. Eden Towers, with its depressing aura, does not live up to its name and although Pedro is a bright and gifted student, it

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*Underneath the apple skin
there is knowledge
and hidden deep within
the seeds of change. (312)*

The Taste of Apple is more than domestic drama. It scrutinises questions of identity, the pain of abandonment, and the search for belonging, and follows Pedro's involvement with the East Timor Freedom Movement. Samples of the ebook and audio tracks are available at the author's web site.

<http://www.jameslaidler.net/samplesaudiovideo.html>

It is pleasing to see Interactive Press publishing innovative works like this and providing opportunities for artists working with sound and text.

Deb Matthews-Zott