The Importance of Being Edited

Alan Loney

Alan Duff

Szabad

Vintage, $19.95pb, 221pp, 1 74051122 0

Kirsty Gunn

Featherstone

Text, $24.95pb, 318pp, 1 877008 12 5

In the almost continuous conversation writers can have with writing, reading can function as anything from a deepening extension to a distinct interruption. When a novelist, in this case Alan Duff in his Acknowledgments to Szabad (a Hungarian word meaning ‘free’), thanks his ‘brilliant editor’ as one who ‘makes sense of my outpourings’, one likes to see due credit given, but it’s hard not to sense an imbalance in the writer–editor relationship. In another context — his weekly column in a New Zealand newspaper — Duff does not have the advantage of a ‘brilliant editor’, and his ‘outpourings’ there are such that more than one writer has wondered why Duff’s prose persistently fails grammatically. His newspaper columns and published novels betray consistent and divergent levels of writerly competence, which cannot be explained away merely by reference to writing for different media. Between the column and the novel thrives the ‘brilliant editor’.

Of course, we know a lot more these days about ‘the sociology of the text’. Whatever comes of private writing, published writing is a social production: publishers’ readers, managing editors, structural editors, copy editors, proofreaders all have a hand, often a major one, in shaping the book. ‘Author’ and ‘writer’ are not always interchangeable.

This distinction is applicable to both these books. Kirsty Gunn’s Featherstone is a writerly book, with a style and tone carefully attuned to letting a mystery tale unfold very differently in different lives over the course of a single weekend. It is complex and intimate in its descriptions, and shows wonderful cunning in hingeing the story on an ‘event’ that may or may not have happened.

Szabad, on the other hand, tells a monochromatic and brutal story that is not complex, is intimate only about the adolescent narrator, and is almost painfully journalistic. The occupation of Hungary by Russia in the 1950s, and the invasion of Budapest are observed through the narrator’s eyes.

When he sees his idolised father, a hard man, return broken from two years’ gaol, he resolves never to cry again and always to inflict ten blows for every blow he receives. The book is full of rage, betrayal, brutality, torture, rape, killing and passion, yet it falls far short of the emotional impact, complexity and craftsmanship of Featherstone.

Each book has obsession at its core: in one, a boy’s sexual obsession for an older woman and his thirst for revenge on those who killed his father; in the other, a quiet man’s obsession for a lost lover which stands as a contrast to the sexual lives and feelings of most of the women in the story. In one, everything is based on how things look. Surfaces are all, revealing what the narrator knows or thinks he needs to know. In the other, the experiences are everything. Gunn’s prose crackles with sharply defined details. In building a sense of place and time, she will offer a set of possibilities and likelihoods that shape an atmosphere more clearly than a list of certainties. It is a prose that slows you down, inviting you to dwell in the language.

Duff’s prose is drenched with certainties, and the brutality of the events is matched by the staccato violence of the writing. There is no room for other voices. Young Attila’s relentless internal narrative drowns out all other information. It was impossible for this reader not to hear the opinionated newspaper columnist at work. Duff is a storyteller, with something to say, and a point to make. He is an orator, and he is ‘telling it like it is’.

His final chapter is a disaster. To have dedicated the book to ‘all those Hungarian heroes and heroines who fought against oppression, who dared to take up arms against impossible odds and fight for democratic freedom’, and then turned Attila into a thug running a pub and illegal betting shop in Sydney, and bribing the police to stay in business, is a serious error of judgment. Attila has not adapted to his new life in Australia; he has no new attitudes or language or values. He is still offering ten blows for one.

In Featherstone, an old man sees, or thinks he sees, his daughter who had left the small country town years before. His account of this ‘sighting’ does not trigger so much as herald, on a late Friday afternoon, the events of the weekend in which a number of women come to an enriched, if devastating, understanding of who they are. The language of the book is always tentative, suggestive, as if the language itself is probing its context for the stories it might reveal. It is a strength of the writing, and one that will attract many for whom reading is more of an exploration than an entertainment.

Both books, however, are solidly within the realist tradition. Previous reviewers of Gunn who have described her as writing ‘like an angel’ or ‘like a dream’ have themselves abandoned the very mode in which Gunn finds herself in Featherstone. Duff writes like someone with one eye firmly focused on the movie that might be made of the book.