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Pepsi Bears and Other Stories by Anson Cameron. Vintage, 2011.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 27 August 2011.

I first encountered Anson Cameron in his 2006 novel *Lies I Told About a Girl*, memorable for its unsentimental warmth and laconic charm. He has now published a book of short stories, *Pepsi Bears and Other Stories*, 'in which,' the title page proclaims, 'the nature of mankind is cruelly illuminated by various beasts.'

Cameron is a highly accomplished craftsman. He writes sentences that make me laugh out loud with delight. He cruises through the animal kingdom in these fourteen stories, skewering human beings for their treatment of animals, and also of other human beings. His satire can be as cavalier and wounding as the Lozetil darts marksmen aim at polar bears to stun them so they can be anointed with the Pepsi logo in the title story. The rampant fertility of his imagination creates the legend of the Eurobeaver, invented by his character to deflect some heat after the polar bear venture becomes a disaster, found to be a sham, but nevertheless attaining cult status and bringing a terrorist fatwa down upon the head of the unwise inventor, who finds himself sharing his exile with Salman Rushdie. It creates a zebra, painted brown by a jealous travelling showman, whose fate is to be consumed by the mud of a battlefield in Flanders. In 'This exhibit has been eaten' there is a whole zoo full of animals in Port Moresby who are eaten by their keepers, and a whole district full of farm animals 'near the irksome town of Korumburra in the green hills of Gippsland' who are made to bear the cross of religious mania to enrich their owners in 'Jesus rides a cash cow.' Animals make only brief appearances in 'Mister Bruce', about a reckless white man in the volcano-ravaged town of Rabaul, whose servant is called Expendable Buloo. This is an unusually heavy-handedly example of satire: usually Cameron has a somewhat lighter touch. In 'Turtle Soup', three preppy youngsters holidaying in South America find that the Red Guards of the Nicaraguan Liberation with whom they're sharing a mountain hut speak English after all, and thus have understood everything they've been saying. 'A busy silence falls then.' Five words say so much.

These are extremely clever stories, and the prose zings and bounces around like a ping pong ball in a confined space. What I missed in most of the stories was the warmth I remembered from *Lies I Told About a Girl*, and for that reason the story which stood out for me was 'House of Stolen Dogs'. Not that its protagonist-narrator is a particularly pleasant character: he is a privileged boy in a Victorian small town who enjoys tormenting a younger boy about his dog Willy. 'The war was only twenty years over and krauts were still on the nose, so there was no reason not to break a shoeless German boy's heart.' This beautifully resonant sentence lifts the story out of the confines of satire on a philistine society and gives it a broader perspective, especially when the older boy finally redeems himself in a way few other characters in the stories do.

Though they are enjoyable and immensely inventive, these stories would perhaps be better read one by one rather than in sequence, as I did. I found them rather depressing overall, except when I thought again of that shoeless German boy, whose image will remain with me longer even than that of the gallant zebra sinking in the Belgian slime.