

David Mortimer, *Magic Logic* (Puncher & Wattman Poetry, 2012)

Adelaide poet David Mortimer has two prior poetry collections in book form and a 2010 CD recording of poems. He has been short-listed for poetry prizes, including the major Montreal International Poetry Prize 2011, and also published in *The Best Australian Poems 2012* (Black Inc. 2012). While a review of his new work has to put such considerations aside, *Magic Logic* does reveal a poet keenly attuned to his craft.

Introductory notes indicate that the poems were all begun between 2003 and 2009. They are disposed in four chronologically ordered sections, plus a smaller postscript one, though the ordering does not seem vital to the experience of reading them. The title of the book is intended to pose a tension, as if between left-brain and right-brain thinking. At one level, it could also be seen to explain different approaches taken in the various poems themselves.

Mortimer has made it clear in public talks that he places a high value on the sound of the poem, especially as reading it aloud – putting it in one’s mouth – emphasises the shifts and balances at work in shaping the lines. The music in them becomes clearer; there is a pulse in each case that is particularly evident when observing line length and, therefore, the breath of the poem. But more of music below.

Perhaps it is no surprise then that long lines and long sentences are important to Mortimer (see ‘cloud philosophy’, [67]), and he negotiated a wider format for this volume specifically to accommodate them. That said, it should be noted both that there are short poems with short lines here too, including some of just two or three lines, and that sound can be equally important in those.

While he sensitively harnesses the push and pull of the words’ inherent rhythm, Mortimer occasionally risks distracting from the underlying and key engine-work of the poem when, especially in longer ones, he becomes occupied with the arrangement of glossier effects. When this happens in something like ‘over the top’ (32-3), it is at least offered with a wink, and in ‘confession (with recurring puzzlement)’ (34-5), as an immersive experience. Less engaging is ‘orbital’ (68) with its torqueing, runaway images that end up jostling each other before being abruptly winched back in to some order by a vivid closing couplet. These poems are generally better geared to the ear and energetic delivery than to closer and slower analysis. They offer most pleasure taken in the former mode..

Mortimer offers small but strong epiphanies in the shorter poems. In ‘momentary’ (69), that is built around a brief observation while waiting for a train. It begins with a sense of imminence:

the sunlight
in the upwardly-brushed pine tree
seems ready to be dramatic

Normally, the third line’s resort to looseness and telling would signal a lack of will by the writer, but it is used here to carefully open into uncertainty, where it becomes apparent that the power to imagine is the actual subject of the poem. There are trains and birds and skies in number of poems collected in *Magic Logic*, including this one. One can play Jung with such things if one likes, but I would simply say that they often link to notions of attachment and release, and perhaps of wishfulness.

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Music is another recurring motif, with specific composers and works used as the centre of a meditation, such as in 'leopold' (43-4), the Montreal Prize listed poem. Mortimer also sneaks in the odd intertextual flicker that is not so obvious; a borrowed line here, a nod to Magritte there. A crisp balance is apparent in 'little birds' (62), which playfully combines jerky visual elements with the sound. This is the poem in full:

Little birds are motoring in the thick air
After rain and before more rain
Being blown at heights and speeds
Over and above and beyond, beneath and below,
Ahead of, and besides themselves,
Over and under the power of their wings

One does not need to know where the birds are going. It is enough that the lines depict the churning motion of the individuals and the flock against a resisting wind. Whether one finds a metaphor in this is up to the reader. On the whole, it is more satisfying than the further detailed 'second-born' (63), which seems content with the imagery of a moment when an infant looked out a window at trees and weather rather than leading to a larger understanding. Here, it seems, the picture is the thing, and little if anything more.

In all, the long line poems offer more pleasure and engagement when they are read aloud, as this stresses their rhythmic heart and discursive nature, whereas the short poems' success hinges more critically on the precision of the images. Each approach has its impressive moments in this collection.

Finally, a niggle ... the closing notes include a heading, 'Thankyous', that is plain ugly English: 'Thanks' would have done nicely. And a note of caution ... David Mortimer and I are members of the same writer's group, though it is one that focuses on the experience of being a writer rather than work-shopping or critiquing each others' material. I have known him for a long time; the poetry scene is like that, and especially intensified in smaller cities such as ours. David may have wondered whether I would say something damning about *Magic Logic*, but I think he will be relieved. As I re-read it, I am, in my own fashion, singing along – and especially to the more spacious and musical poems in this impressive collection.

Steve Evans