

*Small City Tales of Strangeness and Beauty*, eds. Gillian Britton and Stephen Lawrence (Wakefield Press, 2009).

Though not the smallest Australian capital city, Adelaide is often considered a quiet and regressive backwater where nothing much happens. It is plagued by negative comments from both within and without its borders. The Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, even suggested that Adelaide should be shut down, and large numbers of its residents declare they will jump ship and wash ashore in Queensland.

Location statuses on social networking sites are often set to *Radelaide* as their owners attempt to portray their city of residence as radical, progressive, and hip. Others retaliate with *Crap-elaidie*. It doesn't help that Adelaide has a dark seamy underside – a legacy of its history of mysterious disappearances, supposed conspiracies, and brutal murders.

Adelaide, however, is so much more. It is a pastiche of migrant experiences. A blend of European and Aboriginal heritage. It is *football, meat pies, kangaroos* and *Holden cars*. Once it was considered rainy Adelaide, but lately it is better known for its lack of water; its dry dusty plains and dying lawns. Its iconic River Torrens drained to reveal the stinking horrors beneath.

Adelaide is also the Festival City and it knows how to turn out a great event – the Festival of Arts, Fringe Festival, Writers' Week, Womadelaide and the Clipsal 500 are just some of the attractions that show Adelaide at its finest.

It is a city with many faces and expressions. It harbours stories as it harbours its homeless. By day they are seen wandering the streets and alleys, but who is listening? They are stories that need to be told and heard. Stories of strangeness and beauty, set in this small city of Adelaide. The city of churches.

The editors of *Small City Tales of Strangeness and Beauty* begin their introduction with an epigraph that is worthy of mention here not only because it provides a rationale for an anthology such as this, but because it draws attention to a literary contention about the interpretation and cultural mythology of place. The epigraph, a quotation from Nettie Palmer, reads:

*A region or way of life does not begin to exist until it has been interpreted by one artist after another.* (ix)

It is important that writers, artists, musicians and filmmakers interpret, record and understand Adelaide in this way so that Adelaideans see themselves and their surrounds reflected, and non-Adelaideans can glimpse our ways of life and sense of place. Another dimension is added to the reading experience when one recognises familiar places and remembers one's own experiences in these locales. Or when the reader suddenly realises

that s/he was also present at the event being described in a story, and that someone else shared their experience, or that another observer perceived it differently.

Some of the contributors to this anthology hail from Adelaide and its suburbs but others are 'from further afield' (ix). All of the stories, poems and photographs, however, are set in Adelaide or its outskirts. The collection contains around 22 poems and 20 stories (depending on how they are classified) from over 30 authors, and seven photographs, eight including the cover shot, from three photographers. (A ninth photograph appears within the text of one story.)

The photograph selected for the cover is 'Aloft and Aloof' – a low angle, slightly tilted, close-up shot of St Francis Xavier Catholic Cathedral, which creates an impression of imposing and intricate architecture, with shadowy undertones and a flock of pigeons circling above in the small patch of clouded sky. The image evokes a sense of small city claustrophobia yearning for (spiritual) freedom and escape, and creates an atmosphere of mystery. Perfect for a collection of stories and poems set in Adelaide.

The creative works within come from both new and established authors, many of whom are associated with the creative writing programs at the University of Adelaide and Flinders University, and the professional writing course at Adelaide TAFE. Most pieces are well-written and entertaining, however a few lacked the clarity and polish of the majority, as is common with anthologies. Nevertheless, all are readable and engaging.

Several contributions stand out as notable examples of fine writing. Graham Rowlands' poem *25 Fashoda St, Adelaide* has the narrator squatting in the garden to clean up the dead leaves from an old grapevine '...under the English elm / in the African street of / 19<sup>th</sup> century Empires...'. (81) The poem acknowledges what has been imported and what remains of past inhabitants; what can be salvaged and what, or who, has a right to be here.

Steve Evans' story 'Taking the Cake' is reminiscent of the Raymond Carver short story 'A small, good thing'. Evans' story begins quite unremarkably as its protagonist tries to find a park on King William Road and confirm his lunch booking at a bistro. However it very quickly hooks the readers' attention as it shifts to the central storyline of the purchase of a wedding cake and delivers a deft plot twist in conclusion.

Stephen Orr's 'Guarding the Pageant' is another stand-out story. This quirky piece packs a lot of background into 13 pages and makes excellent use of dialogue to convey the life-changing implications of an unlikely encounter with a fortune-telling budgie. Set in various places around Adelaide, it begins at the Earth Fair and takes us from suburban Wynn Vale to Salisbury and, via the pageant, ends on King William Street.

Rob de Kok's 'The Dumbest Thing Christ Ever Said', a first-person narrative, is particularly impressive and demonstrates the author's skill as an engaging storyteller. At the core of this story are reflections on 'love' and 'trust' and seeing things as they are.

The stories and poems in this collection lead the reader to Adelaide landmarks such as the River Torrens, Botanic Gardens, Rundle Street, Rundle Mall, Central Market

and the suburbs. Along the way there are buskers, arcades, the Gawler Place fountain and the Rundle Mall pigs, as well as Writers' Week, the Festival Theatre, Rymill Park, The Stag and the Northern Lights display. We meet the wealthy and the homeless, the tourists from other cities and countries, the immigrant families and the residents of multicultural Rangoon Road.

'Outing', by Anna Solding, gives us a child's perspective on a day trip to the city with his 'Auntie Eddie' – a family friend. It begins with the arresting line 'Today, my mum killed my sister' (11) and contains some striking and evocative images, which work well to convey the emotional undertow of the family's situation.

Angela Smith's poem *Flight DJ 546 from Adelaide* shies away 'from the reality of the writer' as the narrator refers back to a book signing session with the poet Paul Durcan at Writers' Week and his warning that 'It is vital not to meet the writer in person' (27). Larry Buttrose reminds us of the weekend garage band. Brunette Lenkić's character Marina is embarrassed by the traditions and food choices of her European parents who are not like her Australian friends and their families. Jude Aquilina asks 'who is it that looks back at us and how did we come to be in this curious composition?' (9)

This anthology goes a long way towards revealing what Adelaide is made of, however there is scope for further collections as there are certainly many more stories of a personal and historical flavour lingering in kitchens and sheds and living rooms all over the city and its suburbs. As Nettie Palmer advocates, we must continue to record and interpret these many strands of story so the full fabric of our region exists for us all.

This is Adelaide: 'Who says nothing happens here?' (Jill Jones, 47).

**Debra Zott**