Workshopping the Heart: New and Selected Poems by Jeri Kroll (Wakefield Press, 2013)
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I am delighted to be launching the book of a very fine writer and friend. Jeri Kroll’s Workshopping the Heart is that special sort of poetry book, a New and Selected volume, poetry’s ultimate act of distillation, and so a real landmark in a literary career. I’ve known Jeri since 1981 and I remember how I was struck by the first poems of hers that I heard, at Friendly Street, and by what a distinctive voice and character came across. It was certainly a case of the style being the woman herself.

Such energy, boldness, and unexpected leaps and turns: whether going at a cracking pace or else pausing reflectively, the poetry is always vibrant and engaging since Jeri trusts the sensitivity and intelligence of the reader. These are generous, wholehearted poems in their open attitude to the world. Feelings, emotions, are expressed with assurance tempered with tact, a sense of perspective and good judgement. Since one can make more free with adjectives in a speech than in a poem I’ll add that Jeri’s writing can be playful, provocative, seductive, flamboyant, challenging, confronting and exhilarating.

Her relationship to language is bold and precise in choice of words and in the use of syntactical short cuts, implication and silence. The originality of the images is one of the delights. For example, ‘ridges like reptiles’ vertebrae’; ‘old friends, quaint as long division’; ‘the century strutted out like a supermodel’, and this:

Spring is Gesprungen when head opens
like a back door
and all the kids rush out
without their coats.

There is also the humour: warm relish at the incongruity of things, wryness, wit, irony or a play on words, a putting of language through its paces. The double intention of irony and the double apprehension of humour with their changing angles and perspectives are part of the deep seriousness of the work as a whole, and of Jeri’s engagement with life and art.

As I read, and reread, I admired the skilful use of free verse rhythms, and the polished use of traditional verse forms. Also, the way poems are structured to dramatic effect; the pace and timing; the subtly chosen line breaks, often with a density of meaning and energy at both ends. And how many quotable lines there are.

I’d like to say something briefly about each book represented in this selection.

Death as Mr Right is a sparkling blend of sophistication and honesty, full of contrasts, spanning life and death. It’s a lively introduction to the frankness, quirkiness and acuity of Jeri Kroll’s gaze.

With Indian Movies you are struck immediately by the richness of the imagery. These are sensuous, sexy poems ranging from landscape to love, from Australia to India, the latter being much more than travel cameos: they are exotic and highly coloured, but shadowy too: the powerful villanelle ‘Towers of Silence’, for instance, or ‘The Reluctant Bride’ about a 14-year-old girl strangled to death by her husband.
When I think of Jeri’s third book *Monster Love* my memory jumps to a week in the Flinders Ranges, a masterclass with the famous Czech poet Miroslav Holub; it was quite clear that the manuscript which most captured his attention and admiration was Jeri’s *Monster Love*. He found it daring and original and I remember him saying there was nothing like it in Czech poetry.

Various aspects of love are touched on in this section, but it is the mother-son relationship which predominates and Jeri gives voice to the frustrated, desperate, fearful moments as well as the passionate tenderness of the ongoing bond:

I hate you, I love you, I hate you, I love you.
That’s clear unambiguous truth.

*House Arrest* spans the globe from Albany, New York, and San Francisco to Adelaide Writers Week and the Southside Youth Centre, from Tidbinbilla to deep space. This is a densely inhabited book with many arresting images. Here are a few lines from the portrait of Helen, a social worker:

Her instinct for sensing another’s pain
is as precise as the sun
striking the heart of Stonehenge,
or a radio telescope
plotting the souls of stars.

*The Mother Workshops*: Here, as elsewhere, there is no shrinking from painful or ambivalent subject matter. These finely observed and focused poems about an aging mother’s journey through dementia to death are very affecting with no risk of sentimentality, in part through the framing and distancing technique of presenting them as workshop exercises, a series of stations or spiritual exercises along the path. I’ll read Exercise 1: ‘Similes’:

The Mother
The mother’s skin feels sheer as a moth’s wing.
The mother’s eyes look pale
as winter sky nearly empty of rain.

the mother’s nose sniffs
like a dog’s in unfamiliar territory.
The mother’s hip explodes like peanut brittle.
She prods the world with a cane,
peevish for answers.
The mother loses nouns and verbs,
flaps like a bird counting chicks in her nest,
keeps coming up with the wrong number.
The mother is a still pool,
waiting for me to ripple with my words.
I stir and stir.
New Poems includes some wry considerations of time passing and awareness of mortality, and there is a literary menagerie too. I always knew Jeri’s affinity with horses but here she shows empathy also for cows, swans, dogs, cockatoos, snakes, kestrels. I enjoyed the playful wit of ‘Possums’ which begins,

I hear them in the night
scuttling across my mind,
nibbling at neurons,
peeing on synapses,
shorting out links between words.

In this group, ‘The Zen of Grey’ is another favourite of mine; Jeri moves easily between earth and air – from the things and creatures of the earth to a relevant abstraction:

Pure white is rare in a horse’s coat
the truth is mainly grey.

The final section, Vanishing Point, is a tantalising taster from Part One of a verse novel, or rather a crossover poetry novel, written convincingly in the voice of a teenage girl with anorexia. As a narrative it is page-turning, as a series of cameos and incidents it has a touching lyrical immediacy. The full volume due out soon will be launched, I believe during the second semester. I’ll be eager to find out what happens next.

All this adds up to Workshopping the Heart, handsomely produced by Wakefield Press: a beautifully written collection, technically accomplished, finely balanced and full of life. It is a dance of the intellect and the senses, and of imagination in many guises, but I think that Workshopping the Heart is, above all, about relating to others, about love actually: to quote from the poem ‘In the Balance’, ‘the bewildered heart still outweighs all else.’

It is a pleasure and an honour to launch Jeri’s fine New and Selected volume: I heartily recommend Workshopping the Heart to you all.