
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Kate Llewellyn has produced, with seeming effortlessness, a string of books which on the surface are diaries, catalogues of days and seasons passing. Starting in 1987 with *The Waterlily*, she has documented a life of domesticity and friendships. There are moments of drama but that is not what makes these books readable, almost addictive. In *Burning* (1997) she explains: ‘It’s like life. While we wait for the big events, we live. Living makes life, not great events. But meals are being made all the time, gardens are being planted and fires lit. Somebody bakes a cake …’

*Playing with Water: A Story of A Garden* is the latest of these books. Moving from her house in Leura in the Blue Mountains, with its lush garden, to a house in a small town just north of Wollongong on the New South Wales coast, she is struck by the bareness of her surroundings: ‘One day, walking back from the beach, I looked and, in that way that sometimes comes, saw clearly what a contrast all this was to where I’d lived before. I felt appalled and thought, What have I done? … I became galvanised like a mad woman. … I couldn’t bear to live in so barren a place.’

So, more than the previous books, this one focuses on the creation of a garden full of trees and flowers, a garden that seems overgrown and wild to many of her neighbours. With the supreme confidence of a seasoned writer, Llewellyn allows herself to philosophise about life and jam-making, vandalism and families, weeds and old age. Recipes are strewn throughout the book, sometimes connected to the narrative with the
flimsiest of pretexts. Poems stud the prose too, offering distilled commentary on events and themes.

There is drama in *Playing with Water*, and it comes mainly from the quixotic project she conceives of planting a garden at the railway station. Tired of getting no response to her requests for a few trees to shade the platform, she begins wheeling her ancient wheelbarrow down the road and putting in a few seedlings and cuttings. It is six months before anyone on the station staff even speaks to her, but eventually they begin to take an interest and to co-operate in trying to keep the vandals from destroying everything she does. Her philosophy is to set out and hope others will join in – to keep persevering despite the casual destruction which almost renders all the effort fruitless, because eventually the vandals will become bored. Not persuasion, but the power of the fait accompli. And it seems to work.

Despite the impression of barrenness which assails her at first, she soon gets to know the keen gardeners among her neighbours. She is especially drawn to David, a blind man living alone, maintaining his garden and his independence. He becomes her ally at the railway station, somewhat of an inspiration, with his strength, bravery and patience.

About a fifth of the way into *Playing with Water*, Llewellyn remarks, ‘by now, I don’t think anybody who does not love gardens will be reading this.’ I’m not sure: it’s possible that this beguiling book will create or at least encourage an interest in what is for her a consuming passion. I have myself made several trips to the nursery since starting to read the book. What is most appealing is that Llewellyn never claims to be an expert. The fun, she seems to be saying, is in experimenting, not in creating perfection. And perhaps
this attitude carries over into her writing. Rather than setting out to make a perfect work of art like a novel, she writes, day in day out, spinning a seductive narrative from the events of every day.