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Bob Franklin. *Under Stones* (Affirm Press, 2010)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, recorded 8 May 2010.

Affirm Press, a Melbourne-based publisher in its third year of operation, has made a commitment to publish six individual story collections in 2010. One of these is Bob Franklin's *Under Stones*.

There are 24 stories in this collection, including a few longish stories of 15 to 25 pages. Most, however, are quite short, and some barely two pages long. All are blackly humorous and sinister: the supernatural is never too far away. Some are fairly standard horror stories, complete with fangs, batwings and cliffhanger endings. The more interesting stories concern the way that a disturbed imagination plays tricks on the mind. One of the best is 'Traitor's Bay', in which a mistreated wife is left alone in a holiday home with her young son and the dog while her thuggish husband travels back to Melbourne to take care of some shady business. Franklin builds up her sense of threat and unease to a disturbing climax. 'Take the Free Tour', another of the longer stories, is less tense but still gritty. A young journalist finds his addiction to Internet porn leaking surreally into his working life, with disastrous results for both himself and his colleagues. 'Bag Limit' features a duck hunter who becomes the hunted. In this clever story, the hunter is not a gung-ho idiot but a careful, responsible sportsman who wouldn't dream of exceeding his bag limit or shooting ducks on the water. 'Proper hunters, ethics dictated, only took birds on the wing.' In the final story, 'Thesis Examining a Student's Path to Crime', a desperately uncool student at a mediocre London polytechnic, with a pathological dislike of cruelty to animals, takes a room with a dysfunctional suburban family. This mordant first-person tale charts his progress from new lodger to criminal awaiting trial with a creepy remorselessness reminiscent of M.J. Hyland. Another disturbing first-person story set in England concerns a duty visit from an Australian schoolteacher to his parents in a retirement settlement on the coast of Devon. Some strange transactions are going on in the town, and it seems the drug dealers aren't just targeting the young.

Many of the shorter stories are scarcely-developed, brief sketches, amounting to little more than gags. Some are mini morality tales – in 'Worth', a rapacious councillor

visits a town destroyed by her unscrupulous activities, and finds herself persecuted by mannequins and unaccountably locked up in the deserted town's gaol. The opening story is particularly powerful: a bigoted 'Ironman' reaps the rewards of his contempt for the local aborigines. And 'Pro Life' is a moving narrative poem about a woman bereft of her lover and waiting for an abortion.

*Under Stones* starts very strongly and maintains interest for some time, though it falls away a bit in the second half. Perhaps some of the shorter stories could have been omitted with advantage: the surprises start being predictable after a while, and once that happens the more leisurely stories, with their acute characterisations and bizarre humour, work better. But Franklin certainly knows how to write, and I hope he follows this up with a novel where he can allow his narrative skills fuller scope.