

BOOK REVIEW

By Adrian Rogers

There is an old saying, “Art conceals art”, which I take to mean that good art does not advertise the techniques by which it makes an impact. In other words, it does not show off its technical skills. Cleverness of course there is in the mastery of any craft, but what should come across is the beauty and effectiveness of the work itself, not the means by which it was achieved. This is certainly true of Brenda Eldridge’s work intriguingly titled ‘From Patagonia to Australia’, in which the description ‘Collected Prose’ describes a gathering of essays from various sources, with the chapters grouped under overall headings. At this point the one may be tempted to remember ‘essays’ as those outpourings demanded as school homework, to be handed in by a specified date, but let us not be put off by memory. Essay writing is an ancient and honourable literary craft, practised by many distinguished writers over the last few centuries, with interesting, entertaining, and often thought provoking results.

Brenda’s style is deft and assured, seemingly straightforward, attractive, and spontaneous, but don’t be deceived; this apparent spontaneity is not the result of jotting down the first thing that comes into ones head, but the outcome of a mastery of the craft of writing acquired in the hard school of experience. These essays then cover a variety of themes. There is landscape—none of which reads like a travel brochure. There is autobiography, reminiscences of different times, places, and people, and personal thoughts on many things, the whole bound together by a unity of style and presentation.

Here then are some examples; regarding landscape for instance, this description of crossing the Hay Plains surprised me when I first read it;

‘The road to Hay. This was it. The long stretch of nothing. Except it wasn’t like that. The Hay Plains were vast but had a softness that was so gentle on my senses. They were covered in small bushes with pale green leaves which gave the look of a

constantly moving ocean. There were solitary slender trees, or now and then a huddle in the distance, but no enormous old gums. We watched the same unusual shaped clouds for miles and miles...'

Now you won't read that in a Lonely Planet Guide. In fact I doubt if the average travel agent would give the Hay Plains a thought, but Brenda's evocation shows what is really there, if one will but take the trouble to observe without making assumptions about what one is supposed to be seeing. However, not all her descriptions have this gentle, reflective quality. Her evocation of Ninety-Mile-Beach in the Coorong really picks up the pace;

'As I stepped past the last of the dunes, the beach stretched, as the name implied, for miles either way. The sand was harsh and gritty and very much darker brown than the white dunes. Such a contrast. The beach was not very wide before gigantic, hungry waves came rolling and crashing in...

...I walked along the waterline and floundered trying to keep on my feet. Each receding wave felt as if it was trying to drag the whole landmass back into the ocean...'

Now here's Brenda reminiscing about her home in Port Adelaide, where the writing takes on a more subjective, personal tone;

'It took a year or more to get used to not having trees close by to limit my view of the sky. I felt exposed and vulnerable as great cloud banks rolled in off the sea, and an invisible hand painted panoramic sunsets rich with red and gold clouds. I also have vast and spectacular views of the sky from the guest bedroom window...and I watch mesmerized most mornings as the sky brightens and eventually the sun comes up...'

There are so many homely details in her writing, as she observes and remembers; for instance, the love of cycling, and yes, the obligatory falling off we all remember from personal experience. There is shopping, reflections about retirement being most

definitely not retirement from life, but a moving into new avenues of discovery and endeavour.

It's not all about South Australia; she takes us up into the Northern Territory, down the East Coast, to Canberra, and on south into Victoria; so much to see with an acutely observant eye for detail that never yet comes across as fussy. Indeed the whole collection has an engaging lightness of touch and crispness of style that make for a most enjoyable read. I will now quote from her vivid reflections on Kakadu;

'...a savanna woodland, not the tall eucalyptus trees. This was no pathway through green tunnels, like in Tasmania. The leaves were not the blue/grey ones we see in South Australia...These trees had fresh looking leaves with a touch of yellow in the green giving them a wonderful lightness...'

One must exercise self discipline, because there's so much here worth quoting, and one doesn't want to spoil the reader's sense of surprise by taking all the unexpectedness away, so I will just quote a little of what she says concerning the rock art for which Kakadu is justly famous;

'...I could talk of the story the artwork tells and the colours, and how they made the paint, but none of this means much till you come across these figures in the vast expanse of the land. There are thousands of these sites hidden within Arnhem Land.'

I'm sure we will all agree with Brenda if we do as she did, look out from those rocky, painted escarpments across the flood plain, taking in the vast wildness of Arnhem

Land. And here is a very wise comment which, had it been made and taken to heart in earlier generations might have spared both Indigenous, and non-indigenous peoples much misunderstanding and heartache;

'There's so little we know or will be told of the Aboriginal people and their ways, and it's to break a sacred trust to intrude with our questions. We can only accept what they choose to share with us...'

...and this concerning the Rainbow Serpent;

'...I loved this concept of a snake making the space for waterways and in turn sustaining all life. I felt too that Ted was sharing a precious gift as he told us about the Creation Ancestors while he escorted us through this place...'

The enchanting diversity of this 'Collected Prose' as Brenda calls it makes for a great read; anything but 'prosaic' in fact. Every chapter contains things of interest; there is no 'marking time' so to speak while we wait for the next big idea to come along. And here is another unexpected discovery, in that for Brenda, 'Patagonia' is not the known location in South America, but her name for that place of the heart where one feels completely at ease, able to be simply oneself. All in all this is a book to read and re-read, so it is only fair to let the author have the last word at the end of her travels.

'What an extraordinary journey. A big circle that looks so small on the map of Australia...It will take time to digest, and no doubt different things will remind me of where we went and who we met, and the past will settle where it belongs, the depth that makes the present so glorious.'

Bio

Adrian Rogers was born in England, trained as a teacher in Ireland, teaching in that country, then in Scotland, The Shetland Islands, England, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, before retiring in 2005, thereafter devoting much of my time to writing. He has six fantasy novels in print, four published by Double Dragon in Canada, and two by Mountain Mist in Australia. He also has two novels issued (also by Double Dragon) as e-books. He has contributed poetry, articles, and short stories to numerous periodicals and anthologies. He also has three collections of poetry published by

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