

Launch speech by Anne Kellas for *Blue Giraffe* #8

Republic Bar and Café, 7 December 2008

It is my great pleasure to launch this issue of *Blue Giraffe*, and thank you Peter for asking me to do so.

TS Eliot said wisely, “The experience of poetry, like any other experience, is only partially translatable into words”.¹

Which explains why it is so hard to write a good launch speech, or a good poetry review! And why it is much easier just to fill the time up with praise-singing.

But I *am* full of praise. This is a very good collection.

First, I would like to declare myself an impartial observer: I am one of the poets that Peter Macrow rejected for this edition. An hour ago a friend of mine dropped in and when I said I was about to launch it, said “Ah, I have heard of *Blue Giraffe*,” and eagerly dipped into it, then asked, “No Anne Kellas in here?” “No,” I said.

“Oh well, tell him where to get off then!” my friend retorted defensively on my behalf. “No no,” I replied: “It’s not like that at all. It’s his right to reject me. And anyway, maybe he was right about the poem I sent him. It is what the editor thinks of the poem, not the poet that counts.”

Here, in this quiet publication, it is poem pitted against poem. We are away from the drama of the poet as persona. We often make too much of the personal in our Poetry Land: the cliques, the fashions, the schools, this or that group. That is all just so much more white noise to ignore. Think about it: the giraffe’s an animal that sticks its neck out ... but it is very quiet and very gentle.

Giraffes listen,
listen intently.

If you have ever watched one in the wild, you will notice they are very selective about what they eat, which leaf, from which tree ... They amble, they are graceful, they are quiet animals. They do not trumpet like elephants that fill themselves with over-ripe amarula berries and push trees over; giraffes don’t hunt like lions.

They have many rivals, like hyenas. *Blue Dogs*...

It is the good editors and good reviewers who so often challenge what you believe about literature. For me, this is how it should be. It keeps things vital, and honest. This is one of the good things about *Blue Giraffe*: it is brave enough to stick out from the crowd and do its own thing, it is an animal that keeps to its principles and dares to be selective. This is after all what giraffes, and good editors, do.

¹ TS Eliot *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 17-18.

So, let us put ourselves into that ready state of listening. Let's put everything aside, and go into the scrub of Poetry Land, to the place where the forests of poem grow, and find the rare beast, the *Blue Giraffe*.

The chief note I hear in these poems is the clear note of honesty. Vitality and honesty are, I believe, essential for a good poetry magazine, a good poetry review, a good poem.

That note of honesty I hear in Mal Robertson's poems, and I hear it in Ivy Alvarez's poem, *Stolen*, on page nine:

**I have procured time for us
and I forget
the name of the show**

**I sit and watch it with you
your hair so near
the dark whorl of your ear**

**my body
responds to your body
insisting always**

**you leave and I leave
and the story goes on
without us**

© Ivy Alvarez

There are some excellent poems here, like Megan Schaffner's, on page four:

From the far country of grief they come

**in the early light of dawn
hollow with loss and clothed in unfamiliar beauty.**

**Through the flickering mirage they stumble towards us
bearing – oh so tenderly – their terrible load.**

**We reach out to embrace them
but they are the untouchables who have fed on bitter bread.**

**We speak to them across the chasm
but our words fall at our feet.
They listen for a language we have not learned,
see the lost one in turned heads,
a figure disappearing in a crowd –**

**On the cliffs they pause
to stare at shapes that gather in the fog drift of the sea ...**

**the restless sea
endlessly singing**

Is now and ever shall be ...

© *Megan Schaffner*

“Any poem that does not just slide past us like all those thousands of others usually has an ignition point for our attention,” Clive James said recently in a short article online.² The ignition point for me in this collection is Leanne Jaeger’s seagull poem – well there are two, there’s one on the back cover too, but the one at the start of the collection grabbed me:

Something About Seagulls

**The way their white wings
punctuate the sky, the sea, the shoreline.
They way past and future is a forgotten flight.
The way instinct and survival is sacred.
The way their caustic cries pay tribute
to the sand grit of reality.
The way they show it all –
vulnerability, greed, cunning, grace.
The way they open their beaks to the sky
in the sharpest prayer you ever saw.
Most of all,
the way they gulp down
some half-eaten scrap of food –
their snap decision
to treasure the trash.**

© **Leanne Jaeger**

Earlier, I said, in the long view it is the poem that counts. When we write, what we write is pitted against the canon – and the canon is the work – not the person. When I re-read anthologies, such as the *Faber 20th Century Book of Verse*, I come across names of poets no one talks about anymore; but their poems speak to me; it is the poem that counts, that outlives us all, if it is worthy.

² Clive James, ‘Little low heavens’, in the UK Poetry Foundation online magazine, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/feature.html?id=182120>, viewed 6 December 2008.

In a book review I never completed due to family bereavement, a review of Pete Hay's *Silently on the Tide*, I planned to write that, down the track, in the canon of Tasmanian poetry, when the dust of history has settled and we are all gone to that far country Megan's poem speaks of, it will be Pete Hay who will stand head and shoulders above us all. Listen to this, on page 29:

Quoll

These soft eyes, sweet as a courtesan's.

This livery of dappled snow.

This trim bobbin of backland roads.

This paragon of light-stept love.

This democratic gluttony.

This remorseless dealing in death.

This pitiless lurker of the dark scrub runs.

This cold murderous heart.

© **Peter Hay**

Peter Macrow has given the world a great outlet for poetry. Yes, another great outlet, but one that is different, as every collection of *Blue Giraffe* is different.

The *Blue Giraffe* is thankfully not an endangered species.

It's right here, in our country.

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Poets: send it your poems.

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Yes, an abundance of copies. After all, a copy is, more or less the same price as ...

- a cup of coffee at Maldini's,
- a sandwich at lunchtime in town
- a chocolate nut slice at Jackman and McCross;

... and I dare to say, it's more tasty.

While you reach for the small change in your pocket, let me conclude with an extract from Pete Hay's launch speech for *Blue Giraffe* #4, where he said to Peter Macrow, "Never stop, Peter, never stop."

To this I add, "Thank you, Peter, thank you."

NOTES

Poets in *Blue Giraffe* 8 include:

Desh Balasubramaniam, Jenny Barnard, Nadine Browne, Lerys Byrnes, Josephine Clarke, Anne Collins, Lorraine Haig, Pete Hay, Richard Hillman, Ivy Alvarez, Leanne Jaeger, Judith E P Johnson, Jeff Klooger, Yve Louis, Anne Morgan, Agnieszka Niemira, B N Oakman, Lyn Reeves, Duncan Richardson, Yvonne Petitjean, Mal Robertson, Megan Schaffner, Marion Tracy, and Joan Webb.