

Launch of *Two with Nature*, Ellen Hickman and John Ryan, Fremantle Press, 2012, on 8 November 2012 @ ECU Shop.

I feel very privileged to be part of the launch of this extraordinarily beautiful book. And it's not just the superb botanical drawings that are beautiful. (I won't say any more about them, though I'd love to, because Philippa will be launching that part of the book.... Um, can you actually launch *part* of a book?) But John Ryan's poems too have a quiet beauty that is quite captivating.

In his Introduction John calls his poems 'botanical poetry'. By this he means that his poetry 'fuses art and science towards an understanding and appreciation of plant life.' And this it certainly does. Botanical terms and names recur throughout the poetry, giving the poems a sense of precision, and numerous points of contact and harmony between the world of the sensitive observer of nature and the more rigorous world of the analyst and classifier.

I said harmony, and I want to stress that word. Because that old fashioned and clichéd dichotomy between art and science is totally absent from John's poetry. These are poems written by someone who so loves nature that he has taken the time and spent the intellectual effort to understand and wonder at the miraculous intimacy of its workings. In these poems one can feel the delicacy and apparent fragility of so much of the plant life of the South West of this state and, by implication, of anywhere that plant life flourishes. But also one can feel its strength, its wiry and often subversive resilience, its persistence in being, yes, at times triumphantly fragile and delicate, no matter what the odds. And, at other times, majestically powerful. Like the jarrah tree, burned hollow by 'a magnificent thrust of liquid fire', yet which still 'lives on as skin / still supple and twisting in pleats' (43).

But these poems are not simply about plants, no matter how superbly they talk about them. They are also, in a reticent but wholly appropriate way, about John too – i.e. about the man whose company we keep as he reveals things to us about the natural world that we would never discover by ourselves. We learn how his

car limped along on three cylinders - he has a new one now – and how ‘on the slick bitumen to Kalamunda... ‘ he ‘end(s) up facing backwards again’ (17). Or how he feels when he flattens a ringtail that runs in front of his car, and how he is ‘haunted by the hand of nightfall / heavy on the back of the day’ (60). Or how ‘traversing sand is exhausting / and, though an overcast day ‘ [he] sweat[s] reams spontaneously, / [his] legs turned flaccid’ (61). Oh boy, how I know that feeling, growing up as I did among the sand dunes of the Southern Ocean.

As you can hear, John’s language has both a precise clarity and a metaphorical density that are not normally found together, and which gives the poetry a very distinct individuality. Here is the description of a forest seen from a tree top walk: ‘These forests are seldom lines or strict geometries, / but tufts and leans, high cumulus-shaped canopies / & cavities cleft in pachydermal trunks, & burls / wart-like & chelonian) (34). (I had to look up the meaning of chelonian , and I found the effort well worth while, as you will too.)

I’m tempted to quote more, but John will be reading from *Two with Nature* later this evening. Besides, you’ll all be buying this book and reading it for yourselves. When you do, you’ll find yourselves being guided gently yet surely, not only into a deeper understanding of the world of plants, but also into what it means and what value it has for the individual you have, almost unwittingly, entrusted yourself too.

This will be a trust you will never regret and also, I hope, never forget. Congratulations, John, and thank you. Thank you.