

A FUSION OF ART AND SCIENCE

Two with Nature

By Ellen Hickman and John Ryan

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Illustrated botanical poetry is an unusual finding in a long tradition of Australian nature writing. In this collaboration, the hotspot of diversity in south-west Australia has inspired a novel approach through illustration and poetic enquiry, used as a specific research method to understand the botanical world.

Ellen Hickman emigrated from England to Western Australia in 1971 and grew up in Perth. Trained in botany and visual arts, she has illustrated botanical and children's books, and has won several prestigious awards. She lives in Albany and works as a consultant and artist.

John Ryan is an essayist, ecological poet and philosopher. He is from New Jersey, USA, with degrees in philosophy and environment, English and environmental design. In between several different professions he has walked vast distances in North America in different seasons with a diary for poetry and reflection on the mystery of plants, places, human-plant interactions and philosophy. Personal history suggests he has become strongly connected to the Western Australian environment. John recently completed a PhD at Edith Cowan University and appears to have taken firm root in Western Australia as a post doctoral research fellow working on 'Cultures of Western Australian Biodiversity'. He has won several awards for poetry.

This book has more than 70 full page illustrations using aquarelle (watercolour pencil) and 20 poems. Each contributor presents a foreword, setting the background and approach to these fruits of long and intensely personal journeys. The technical aspects of illustration are well described for those inspired to follow Hickman's path. She admits to an admiration of Ferdinand Bauer's classic style with dissected plant parts. These bring a depth of details, especially to the orchids *Thelymitra*, *Pterostylis*, *Cryptostylis* and *Eriochilus*; and to *Swainsona*, *Callistemon*, *Pimelea*, *Anigozanthus* and *Eremaea*. There are also black and white and monotone illustrations of eucalypt fruits, more stylized portraits of *Pyrorchis* (Red Beaks), *Caladenia* and *Eriochilus*, and some fine birds and animals.

Ryan's poems are evocative and deeply involved with flowers, bark, roots, trees and shrubs, ecology, and the perceptual responses they elicit. They are preceded by short quotations, often from botanists and naturalists of historical note such as John Lindley, Robert Brown, and Emily Pelloe. He regards the poems as an integral part of research, invoking the writer-as-botanist tradition of David Thoreau, John Clare and Pablo Neruda, to create a poetic interpretation of flora.

Australian poets have devoted much attention to place and animals, with only occasional botanical forays. Noted in the foreword for Western Australian plants are John O'Brien's *Around the Boree Log*, *The Mountain Bells* (O.D. Watson) and more recently, poems on *Nuytsia floribunda* (Alec Choate) and *Rhizanthella gardneri* (John Kinsella). David Campbell (orchids) and Les Murray's *Strangler Fig and Cockspur Bush* captured the essence of some Australian plants. Few Australian botanists have written poetry. Jean Galbraith in Gippsland

and H.M.R. Rupp in New South Wales wrote a little in the course of their work. The best example of an illustrated poetry volume is the iconic *Sun Orchid and Other Poems* by Douglas Stewart (1952), with pen illustrations by Norman Lindsay. Edwin Wilson (Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney) wrote the poetry collections *Songs of the Forest* (1990) and *The Botanic Verses and Other Poems* (1993), both illustrated with pencil drawings by Elizabeth McAlpine.

In general, poetry is presented without annotation or illustration, on the premise that these can reduce the wide range of perceptions provoked in the reader. Writing concerning lesser known species presents the problem of turning readers off at the start, if they have no connection at all with the subject. This book solves the dilemma by separating illustrations and poems for the most part, so that readers may appreciate each in their own right. The contents page and index to species allow cross-referencing. An occasional page combines a piece with a shadowy black and white image to the side, not too distracting.

A few examples will serve to illustrate the major themes and hopefully make further reading imperative.

*'maybe it's my quest for kinship here, but
I quite like caravanning across town
to a rendezvous with a quandong tree'*
(Western Quandong p.68)

'I could also inhabit this arboreal world'
(*Corymbia calophylla* p.69)

On human-plant interactions:-

*'a hundred slits of eyes
hanker in the tree
a hundred slits of eyes
beckoning to me'*
(re. *Acacia murrayana* p.76)

*'Waratah Banksia, scarlet striped with pale perianths
how long they linger, the flower and the tourist'*
(The Rites of Spring p.95)

*'to touch this serrate queen
all the fluids of me
would sizzle and steam'*
(A Colony of Royal Hakea p.77)

On exploration, history:-

*'through the knee-high scrub
Eyre still curses his way
to an upland of Royal Hakea'*
(A Colony of Royal Hakea p.77)

On descriptive characters:-

*'these forests are seldom lines or strict geometries
but tufts & leans, high cumulus-shaped canopies
& cavities cleft in pachydermal trunks & burls
wart-like & chelonian ...'*

(Tree Top Walk *Eucalyptus jacksonii* p.34)

And occasionally a message:-

*'sometimes it works well
to hammer your dulcet tone
into the throat of the wind'*

(Orchid Anima p.42)

It is for the reader to assess whether poetry is a technique to investigate botanical science. Reference to Ryan's published works, which are accessible on-line, would be of help here, and widen the horizons of botanists who find, as I did, the juxtaposition of poetry, illustration and philosophy to be provoking and intriguing. The appreciation of art and poetry is subjective, so looking at and reading this book is the way to gain from the experience, passion and achievement of the authors. If only more publishers would follow the example of Freemantle Press in producing volumes of quality artwork and poetry, either separately or together.

Peter B. Adams
School of Botany
University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia