

Dear Sweet Harry

by Lynn Jenner.

Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010.

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Reviewed by Terry Locke, University of Waikato

Lynn Jenner is another graduate of the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University or Wellington. Now in her 50s, she has practised as a psychologist and counsellor for a number of years before emerging from the strait jacket of work, with shoulders undislocated, as an emerging literary talent on the New Zealand stage. Even before *Dear Sweet Harry* was published, its manuscript had won Jenner the Adam Prize in Creative Writing (2008).

The dust jacket for this book refers to it as “the autobiography of an obsession...in which a collection of ephemera, tokens, and fiery and precise poems casts the pink light of memory”. The book is also described as “global, offbeat, remarkable...unlike anything else in New Zealand literature.” Some of this I can subscribe to, though I would not describe any of the poems as “fiery” – they are too understated for this. And while it *is* offbeat, it is not as unique as the dust jacket claims.

The subject of the verb “casts” is the distant “collection”. If Jenner wrote this sentence, then I’ll take the word “cast” to mean something like “emit” or “project”. Pink is a motif in this book. Here is one instance of it.

Certain historical figures and objects seem to emit pink light. This can take the form of a soft glow with no discernible moment of beginning.

Here is another, in reference to Katherine Mansfield’s birthplace in Wellington:

I thought I could detect a faintly pink *feeling* in one of the upstairs bedrooms and I am sure there was some unusual air movement in the hall, near the collection of her books for sale.

And later, assuming the voice of KM herself, viewing war-torn France objectified as a painting;

The flick of movement, beginning with a round pink shape the size of a pearl, and ending in a tail, like Japanese calligraphy...

I understand the sense of presence contained in the word “pink”. When I was researching Phillip Tapsell for my book *Maketu*, I was ushered into the presence of his two, carved kauri chests in a house in Taneatua. They glowed. Pink is both emanation and connection.

Near the end of *The Waste Land*, Eliot writes: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” In some ways, this book can be thought of as a shoring up of fragments: a recipe for cough mixture; brief potted biographies or anecdotes of Mansfield, Harry Houdini and Mata Hari; the reproduction of a family letter (from Jenner’s family to her grandfather on service during the First World War); a code of whistles; personal letters; news accounts and so on. But where *The Waste Land* is suggestive of cultural disintegration on a large scale, this book can be thought of as celebrating cultural integration on a small, personal scale, even though the historical sweep of the book is huge as it oscillates between the writer’s present and an early twentieth-century past. While the connections are, you might say, personal and to some extent inaccessible to readers, they also issue to the reader an invitation. I would like to pursue this idea of an invitation a little here, foregoing my “literary critic’s” hat for the hat of the “English language educator”.

* * * * *

Say I take your whole bag of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the things an art-form,
...and that the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in...

Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* [opening]

Let's picture a senior English class containing at least some students with an interest in history. Let's think of cultural history in terms of a variety of metaphors: rag-bag, or a railway network of various nodes, or rhizome, or hypertext structure. Let's challenge students to entertain the idea of combining historical inquiry with poetic creativity. Show them the acknowledgements pages in Jenner's *Dear Sweet Harry*. Get them to reflect on the apparent unconnectedness of these sources and on the words: "Although I have used real names, characters and historical situations, I have changed dates, brought characters together and expanded facts, for the purposes of fiction." Explain that the word "fiction" is from the Latin verb "fingere": shape, fashion, form, mould. Point out to them various websites listed and visit www.houdini.org/ for both fun and enlightenment.

Introduce them to the poem where Jenner writes about the moment where she connected with Harry Houdini. It begins:

Houdini first began to light up for me when he ended his account of the upside down strait-jacket escape with

"Then I am entirely free."

Have them reflect a little on the word "free". What does it mean literally in this context? What might Houdini be seeking to free himself from in a broader sense? What would we need to know to answer this question? Are there clues in *Dear Sweet Harry*? What might have driven Houdini to take up the occupation of escape artist; or Mata Hari to change her name and become an exotic dancer?

This is just a preliminary foray, really, or what Gordon Wells might call the "launch" of a process of inquiry. The end-point of their "Dear x" project would be a creative work using juxtaposition as organising principle, but with freedom in terms of presentational form. It could be a booklet; it could be poster or web-based hypertext. To get started, they would need to find a way of linking back to the past. One idea would be for them to find an heirloom at home and begin investigating its history, seeing how many connections they can make, both back in time and across the same time. Another idea might be to see if the family has any old letters, or whether someone in the family has done a family history. And so on.

If you're beginning to find this idea appealing, then I'd suggest you buy the book or get the Department to buy it. You'll enjoy the trip it takes you on, and I think a number of your students would enjoy it, too, especially if they have the book in one hand and their I-phone in the other.

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