

Everyday Words and Creative Practice: Ten Australian Poets in Conversation

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Creative Practice:
Ten Australian Poets in
Conversation

Edited by Jen Webb and Monica Carroll

With interviews conducted by
Jen Webb and Kevin Brophy



PUNCHER & WATTMANN

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Dedication | vi |
| Acknowledgments | vii |
| Chief Investigator's Introduction | 1 |
| Interviewer's Introduction | 6 |
| Prologue | 9 |
| "Out of that came a great love of birds" <i>Diane Fahey</i> | 19 |
| "Look at the rasa of the poem" <i>Jennifer Harrison</i> | 34 |
| "Start up an idea, a poetry idea" <i>Jill Jones</i> | 49 |
| "Genuinely speaking" <i>Justin Clemens</i> | 69 |
| "Watching how thoughts move" <i>Ken Bolton</i> | 87 |
| "Let the poem call the shots" <i>Michael Sharkey</i> | 100 |
| "You have to wrestle with it sometimes" <i>Mike Ladd</i> | 120 |
| "It's poetry itself that matters" <i>Philip Salom</i> | 138 |
| "You can't write if you're cut off from life" <i>Robyn Rowland</i> | 156 |
| "A lot of accident about it" <i>Ron Pretty</i> | 171 |
| Poet biographical notes | 191 |

Dedication

To Dr Sandra Burr, researcher; writer; poet; and animal ethicist, whose departure has left a hole we have never been able to fill.

Chief Investigator's Introduction

In the late 2000s three people—all of us both poets and university-based scholars—began talking seriously about starting an investigation into the links between poetry, knowledge and creativity. For well over a decade we had observed, and been intimately involved in, the growing number of creative writers enrolling in doctoral degrees and, rather than following the conventional path of literary analysis, using the processes and movements of their own creative writing to build knowledge about the topic, question or problem that interested them. This may seem *de rigueur* now, after more than twenty years of creative doctorates being conducted and completed by artists at universities across Australia, but ten or fifteen years ago it took some argument to explain and justify what was going on in that domain, and why taxpayer-funded doctorates could legitimately be pursued in creative mode.

For at least as long, all three of us had also been writing poetry; reading poetry; exploring the scholarly and technical literature on poetry; reading what poets said about their own work and its motivating factors; and thinking about how poetry makes—if not the world, at least fractions of that world—go round. And we had researched and published extensively on related issues: Kevin Brophy focusing on creativity, Paul Magee on knowledge, and Jen Webb on creative research. Building on this background and on our shared interests, we completed a pilot project on the question of poetry and knowledge, and then began the slow process of applying for funding. At this point the University of Hertfordshire's Professor Michael Biggs—a leading international figure in the field of arts research—joined the team. Together we structured a project titled 'Understanding Creative Excellence: a case study in poetry', and gratefully accepted funding from the Australian Research Council.

We chose to focus on poetry not only because three of the researchers are poets but also, and more specifically, because poetry is (pretty

much) *sui generis* in the broader literary field.¹ Other genres and modes of writing are, by and large, committed to communication, whether of ideas, story or information. Poetry, by contrast, is not focused on communication, largely because it deals with the ineffable, with that which resists or escapes codification. Hence poetry engages more consistently with the sensory and with imagery than with communicative clarity; hence, as Auden famously wrote, 'poetry makes nothing happen'.²

Moreover, of all literary modes poetry is perhaps the one least committed to instrumentality: it has a very minor presence in the Australian curriculum, and there is neither a popular audience nor large-scale market-oriented production for contemporary English-language poetry. The various reports produced by cultural economist David Throsby bear this out. His 2015 reports show that poetry has virtually no footprint in the larger publisher category, but relies on small and micro-publishers and therefore experiences a more limited distribution network than do children's books, literary and genre fiction, and creative nonfiction.³ Not surprisingly, poets receive the lowest income of all Australian writers, by a substantial margin. As Throsby's team reports, the average gross income from writing in the 2013/2014 financial year reached only \$4,000 for poets, compared with \$12,900 for all writers.⁴

Despite this apparent condition of deficit in the art form, there is a substantial population of poets across the world, possessed of substantial social, intellectual and cultural capital. On the whole poets are highly educated, reflective and engaged individuals whose poetry, prose, and knowledge transfer practices add considerable value to their communities. Despite their comparative exclusion from the world of money and social recognition, they keep producing poetry, keep connecting with other poets, writers and scholars, and show considerable skill in innovation and in community building.

We chose poetry as the site for our investigation into creativity for these reasons, and because that exclusion reduces the variables. In the

first instance, poetry is produced for its own sake, and for the satisfaction of the poet. Another driver might be the acquisition of social and cultural capital but (to use Bourdieu's phrase) poetry's 'emancipation . . . from the rule of money and interest'⁵ means that the investments of time, education, and effort are motivated primarily by the drive to create. By contrast, other fields of creative endeavour, particularly business and science, are necessarily motivated as much by the need to generate a financial or knowledge return. Poetry's 'freedom' may result in a small social, political and economic footprint, but this 'freedom' allows it to act as a site of rich experimentation, cross-art collaboration, art for art's sake practice and creative play.

In his Interviewer's Introduction (below) Kevin Brophy explains something of the recruitment process in which we engaged; this resulted in interviews with seventy-six poets, of whom twenty-one are Australian. Kevin notes in his introduction that though each of the poets answered the same suite of questions, their responses, what they chose to emphasise, and perhaps above all their voices, are highly individual. For the researchers, as we moved from interview to analysis, this was compelling material, and we have published extensively elsewhere on our findings.

Something we did not expect to find, but which became evident from this research, is that collaboration—or at least robust connection with others—is an important aspect of creativity, whether in an art form or in other fields of endeavour. There have been many publications over the past decade that strongly argue against the myth of isolation, and note that collaboration is at the heart of 'excellent'—that is to say, influential, widely recognised—practice.⁶

Though the logic of collaboration is not complex in and of itself, actually performing collaboration is extraordinarily complex. No theories can fully explain what might go on in any relationship; no amount of experience prepares an individual for any new project; and no matter how long you have been researching and / or writing with someone

CHIEF INVESTIGATOR'S INTRODUCTION

else, with each new project you start again from the beginning. Despite such widely recognised complexities, collaboration is a highly desirable value and practice, not least because—the literature suggests—it leads to efficient and effective achievement of outcomes.⁷ However, that literature is generally premised on the (unexpressed) notion of a ‘perfect partnership’, where complementary skills and shared aspirations lead to quality work and a satisfying experience.

This doesn't often happen, principally because the Perfect Partnership is akin to Plato's ideal Form: it doesn't appear in the lived world, because people are neither eternal nor immutable; they are not abstractions, but messy and flawed creatures filled with tangential thoughts, idiosyncratic memories and bad habits. This does not condemn us to suffer the inverse of Plato's Form—the temporary, the fickle and the flawed. Rather, it can remind us that to collaborate effectively in creative practice requires ethical engagement, patience, and enthusiasm. It can also remind artists that collaboration is a great way to shake up their own practice. As the poet Geraldine Monk points out, we can really only escape the straitjacket of our ‘entrenchments’—habitual ways of making and thinking—if we are ‘truly disrupted by the invasive undermining or enhancement of an other. This other is “collaboration”’.⁸ What we learned, in the course of this three-year, nine-nation, four-researcher, seventy-six-poet project is that the poets seek out ways to escape that straitjacket; and find themselves enlivened by, entwined with, others. However loose the weave may be, each poet finds in other people and their writings, ways to examine and extend their own practice, and ways to keep going.

Jen Webb

NOTES

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