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Title: Review of Second Violins: New Stories Inspired by Katherine Mansfield, ed. by Marco Sonzogni

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Example citation: Kimber, G. (2009) Review of Second Violins: New Stories Inspired by Katherine Mansfield, ed. by Marco Sonzogni. *Katherine Mansfield Society Newsletter*. **2**, pp. 13-14. 2040-2597.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

Official URL:

<http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/SiteContentImages/Newsletter-Issue-2-April-2009.pdf>

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Second Violins: New Stories Inspired By Katherine Mansfield, edited by Marco Sonzogni
(Auckland: Random House, 2008) ISBN: 978 1 86941 969 1, 405pp.

In this fascinating collection, seventeen of New Zealand's finest writers were each given the opening paragraph to one of Katherine Mansfield's unfinished short stories as a 'kick-off' to a piece of creative writing of their own. The dazzling variety of the results provides a reminder – if any were needed – of the creativity and individualism of a writer's imagination. Some of the authors keep their allotted paragraph at the beginning of their own short story (e.g. Carl Nixon and Peter Wells) – Vincent O'Sullivan places it at the end of his. Bill Manhire is the only one to create a poem:

You sat at a mirror
Composed of old reflections:
anticipation first, then great fatigue (16)

The range of ideas takes us all over the world, from London and Paris to the Galapagos Islands; from the icy depths of a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium, to the glaring heat of an Auckland summer; from an age of servants and Edwardian mannerisms to modern day gay couples and inner-city knife crime. Some authors choose to make reference to Mansfield both directly and more obliquely, others ignore the connection completely.

Enjoyment is purely subjective; because the editor provided so much leeway and absolute freedom of creative expression, the perceived 'success' of any of these stories depends entirely on the reader's personal tastes. The contributors comprise many of New Zealand's finest writers; their talents are not in dispute here. With that premise, there are a handful of stories that will stay in my memory for a long time.

Stephanie Johnson's brilliant piece 'Shell Piano', cleverly manages to encapsulate an unfinished story within another unfinished story, leaving the reader wanting to know more about the fate of the father and his five motherless daughters. Mansfield's story 'Such a Sweet Old Lady' inspires two of the best tales in the collection – by Alice Tawhui and Witi Ihimaera. Both start with the first paragraph from Mansfield's original story, only to then take their literary creations in different, but equally fascinating directions. 'Mrs Travers' in Tawhui's story is evocative of a character Mansfield herself might have created, with echoes of Miss Moss and Miss Brill, looking back over the disintegration of a life. Ihimaera's old 'Mrs Travers' is transformed into a teenage girl in the Galapagos Islands (a timely reminder of the bicentenary of Darwin's birth in 2009). This is wholly a story for today, with its mythical elements, ecological concerns, and the anthropomorphism of the giant turtle 'El Rey', who returns to haunt Mrs Travers on her deathbed.

Vincent O'Sullivan's classic 'shivery' story based in Paris, smells of catacombs - ashy dark and mysterious: ' Huge empty vans shake past with a hollow sound; and there is a smell of soot and wet stone staircases, a raw, grimy smell . . . (212)', with his protagonist symbolically clutching a collection of Mansfield's short stories:

Charlotte Grimshaw's tale evokes Menton and takes for inspiration not just Mansfield's story 'The Dove's Nest', but also interweaves her own real-life experiences as a child, when she spent several months there, while her father, C. K. Stead, was the Katherine Mansfield memorial fellow in 1972. Fiona Kidman's inspired evocation of a modern day affair and its unravelling, with the associated hurt on all sides – redolent of the best of Joanna Trollope – has an antipodean light intensity that burns into the mind, the image of the sheep reminiscent of the opening scene of 'At the Bay'. Tracey Slaughter's clever interweaving of the diary of life in a strict Swiss TB sanatorium and the 'real' life of the invalid back in England, contains some of the finest writing in the volume:

Thin as salt, the snow litters our blankets, hardens to a slate. We could scratch our names on it.
But we don't [...]
Body by body we are dyed white, whiter, in our steel groves.
Below, above, there are storeys of us. Ice stretches a ghetto from face to face (224).

The sense of desolation of the tubercular patient, the isolation, which Mansfield knew only too well, is brought to life in this hauntingly beautiful tale.

This is a wonderful collection - worth reading for the superb examples of the short story art form in their own right, even without the connection to Mansfield. Personally, I should have liked to have seen Mansfield's versions at the front rather than at the end of the book. The contrast to the new stories would then have been all the more dramatic and meaningful. But this is a small point and Marco Sonzogni is to be congratulated for bringing this landmark collection together.

Gerri Kimber