

Poetry Review Essay

✧ *Coracle*, Janet Jackson, Jackson, 2009

Therapy Like Fish, Marcella Polain, John Leonard Press, 2008

Esperance, Caroline Caddy, Fremantle Press, 2007

Women of the Minotaur, Maree Dawes, Tactile Books, 2008

Flash Company, Murray Jennings, Stone's Publishing Pty Ltd, 2007

Southern Edge, Barbara Temperton, Fremantle Press, 2009

The Anatomy of Blue, Jessika Tong, Sunline Press, 2008

The Best Australian Poems 2008, editor Peter Rose, Black Inc., 2008

Reviewer: **Shane McCauley**

Of all the fine books of poetry published in the period under review, one of the most exciting is Janet Jackson's first major collection, *Coracle*. From the opening lines of the first poem, the reader is introduced to a powerful, resonant and poignantly moving voice:

I am a woman and I speak.

I am a woman with lines on her face and I speak.

I am a woman with lines on her face and scars on her belly and I speak
with the voice of a mother...

'Split'

The incantatory tone is instantly mesmerising, reminding us of the oral origins of all poetry. Rhetorical repetition aside, Jackson's poetry is lean and purposeful. Open the book anywhere and the reader will find *things happening* in the lines: 'give this iceheart your rags to shiver in'; 'Through the light she sees the islands';

'Night is where we are'; 'May rains and sky-high stars dive into you'. There are many stunning poems here, wry and wistful, love poems with a heartbreaking absence of sentimentality, terrific poems of place and observation and understanding.

In these poems, life's sorrows and disappointments, even tragedies, are treated without self-pity:

I have stilled my tongue
I have been silent so long
all my words come out white...

'Damask'

Michael Longley wrote, 'If most people who called themselves poets were tightrope walkers they'd be dead.' Janet Jackson is a poet who walks tightropes, and she's doing exceptionally well at both occupations.

Coracle is unreservedly recommended.

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Marcella Polain's *Therapy Like Fish* is a new collection which contains generous selections from two earlier volumes (including *Dumbstruck*, which won the prestigious Anne Elder Prize). Almost all these poems are in the first person, establishing a predominant mood of personal immediacy. Many work effectively on the level of dramatic monologues, soliloquies, wherein ideas and feelings are poured into an audience's 'ear':

When I was young I saw a film about a dance marathon
in a small American town, some desperate lovers.
Their exhaustion haunted me.

'Marathon'

Despite the number of poems that recall family experiences, the central 'I' remains isolated, the tone tinged with some not quite identifiable sense of regret. The language is not especially 'literary' or 'poetic', but the sincere intensity of the voice compensates for the minimal use of image and musical effects. The poet admits as much in 'Straight':