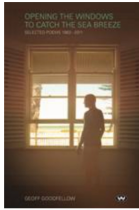


A poet's place and time

review by SK Kelen



Geoff Goodfellow
Opening the Windows to Catch the Sea Breeze: Selected poems 1983-2011
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A volume of new and selected poems signals a watershed in a creative career and taking stock of a poet's life's work to date. Geoff Goodfellow's *Opening the Windows to Catch the Sea Breeze* brings poems from eight of his books. The sense of a life's work is amplified by the primarily autobiographical author's introduction and a passage introducing each section of the book. While the poems stand on their own, and really need no introduction, added biographical and bibliographical details help contextualise the poems and give the reader an insight into the poems' creation (particularly in an educational environment).

Goodfellow came to writing poetry relatively late in life, as a career change from carpentering and building, while recovering from work-induced injury. Though he began his relationship with poetry reading Banjo Paterson, he started writing in free verse and reading contemporary Australian poetry. At first finding many of the poems opaque, he soon found his voice and subject matter in his life and the life around him. He decided what kind of poet he wanted to be:

I wanted to communicate. [...] I thought if I'm going to be a writer (and I really wanted to be one) I'll need to use the language that is within me to write about concerns that people like me have with their day to day living. [...] I thought there must be a lot of people out in the suburbs who want to read about lives similar to their own who didn't particularly rely on sophisticated language and concepts and felt removed from mainstream culture. I wanted to become a voice for these people. (14, Author's Introduction)

He is certainly a poet of place, of specific locality. The odes to the streets and people of his home suburb Semaphore are perhaps the centre of his poetic universe; the circular, at times crazy conversations with his friends, along with people from the street and suburb and their lives captured in quick portraits – some pretty tough, like in 'Melanie' (85), and 'Right On – Right Off' (22) – and in anecdotes, remembered conversations. They get to speak for themselves so their voices sound real. The sense of location in the poems is almost palpable, the poet's eye for detail makes for some handy snapshots of life in Adelaide, especially in his later poems that look back to his growing up: there is a raw nostalgia in poems like 'The Accent' (127).

The poems are well-crafted throughout, and Goodfellow employs a handy arsenal of poetic techniques – rhyming when it suits, using repetition, good for spoken delivery effect and particularly useful for a performance poet. These techniques give many of the poems and parts of poems a songlike quality, as in one of the moving elegies for the poet's father, 'Poem for Johnny', that in the second stanza delivers a chant-like and factual view of his passing:

there's no more
 medication
 no more nebulisers
 no more oxygen masks
 no more calling out for Lois
 no more calling out for mum (115)

A truly democratic spirit, the poet gives a voice and the right of reply to his deceased father, in 'Johnny's Reply' (119).

There is a strong performance dimension to the poems evident in the printed versions. Sounds – the music of words – matter in spoken poetry and flourishes of assonance and alliteration maintain the poems' momentum:

yeah the good old days
 those days when you'd either
 swelter or freeze in those
 outmoded temporary classrooms
 at the local Tech
 where half your teachers
 wore RSL badges
 & were just as neurotic as most
 of your fathers
 & keen as mustard to punch on
 with you in the classrooms [...] ('It All Happened in Copley Street', 133)

Geoff Goodfellow is known as an activist poet who brings his poetry to factories, building sites, schools and readings, and his directly political poems are those of an active observer and participant. The poems about work and the workplace are more nihilistic and stoic than revolutionary, as in 'What Mum Told Me in 1964' and 'The Violence of Work': 'Monday to Sunday / want to punch on / punch on' (159). The positive aspects of working and immigration are visited in 'Turning in Circles' (160).

But anyone expecting simplistic protest poems or a call to arms or some kind of yelled manifesto will be disappointed. Goodfellow writes about life as experienced, and the political aspect is mostly his choice of subjects that often include the lives and speech of ordinary people and the dispossessed. And these people are given their own voices. 'The Luxury of Work' reads like an unedited 'quote' from a shop girl discussing working conditions and how she gets on with her boss. It comes across a bit like a hip-hop rhythmized interview. The Liberal Party appears several times in the poems like a dark spectre muttered under the breath.

The poems in *Opening the Windows to Catch the Sea Breeze* meld every day speech with a neat structure on the page. The lineation of the poems reminds this reader of the work of Nigel Roberts, or Pam Brown, poets who, like Goodfellow, find their exceptional moments in everyday events and speech to create an artifice of poetic conversation spread elegantly down a page. A variety of line lengths from the traditionally iambic – for example, 'you said you don't use an aristotle' (135) – to lines of one or two words, judicious use of the em-dash, and caesura, allow the poet to eschew standard punctuation, and in fact many of the poems read like single sentences spread over several pages.

The later poems take on a more elegiac and confessional tone, particularly those written for his father's passing. The final section of the book features combative poems – fighting cancer fighting for life and health. It narrates the frustrations, sadness and anger with disease, and its treatment. The restrained fury of 'The Seventh Doctor' is sweetly balanced by the quiet whimsy of the dream-like 'Hospital Ship' (195).

The poems in *Opening the Windows to Catch the Sea Breeze* are largely autobiographical – the poet's persona and voice come through very strongly. But they are also poems of place and time that include the words and voices of the people who help make up the poet's world. They go a long way toward capturing the 'vibe' of the Adelaide area in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, securing Geoff Goodfellow a place on the map of Australian poetry.

SK Kelen lives in the bush capital and enjoys hanging around the house, philosophically, and travelling. His most recent books of poems are *Goddess of Mercy*, *Earthly Delights* and *Island Earth*: *New and Selected Poems*, recently published by Brandl & Schlesinger.

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