

Long Paddock

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Polished Stones

Kathryn Lomer, [*Camera Obscura*]

UQP, 2008, 252 pp, ISBN 9780702235979, \$24.95

Ian Alexander, *Second Son*

Ginninderra Press, 2007, 69 pp, ISBN 9781740274654, \$17.50

Neville Fletcher, *Brief Candles*

Ginninderra Press, 2007, 103 pp, ISBN 9781740274678, \$20.00

Tiggy Johnson, *Svetlana or Otherwise*

Mockingbird/Ginninderra Press, 2007, 70 pp, ISBN 9781740274616, \$18.00

Vicky Sentana, *Buried Alive*

Ginninderra Press, 2007, 38 pp, ISBN 9781740274654, \$17.50

Vicki Thornton, *Last Days of Summer*

Mockingbird/Ginninderra Press, 2007, 63 pp, ISBN 9781740274630, \$17.50

Reading short fiction is like meeting a stranger on a plane or train. I'm thinking here of the night train from Athens through the former Yugoslavia, a discount flight on the London-Paris shuttle, a bus trip to Broome through a too-hot summer's day. You and the stranger are going to have an encapsulated moment of time together, you're going to share something, whether you like it or not. There's potential, not necessarily for romance, but for an interaction that takes you out of your ordinary life, offers the opportunity for seeing a sliver of the world through somebody else's eyes. Would any or all of the five short publications from Ginninderra/Mockingbird be memorable travelling companions? Would you want to meet them again? Given that Ginninderra Press was set up, to quote from its website, "to provide opportunities for new and emerging authors as well as for authors writing in unfashionable genres or on unpopular subjects", and given that this is an essential, and brave, function in a lively literary culture, these are important questions. The answers: well, they're up to you too, of course, but from my reading there are some possibilities, others I'm unlikely to want to run into again.

Vicki Thornton's "Just Because" and "Shades of Need", two of thirteen very short pieces in *Last Days of Summer*, look at family relations from less common angles. There's both an edge and a complexity in the stories, which could be taken further. Quite simply, Thornton needs to write more, take the story on a proper ride. Retired physicist, Neville Fletcher's eclectic mix of seventeen short tales has moments of promise, but Fletcher has a tendency to try too hard for the twist at the end, making what was a pleasant enough meeting into a party trick, complete with water-pistols ("Man's Best Friend"), shot-guns ("Collateral Damage") and lines laden with meaning ("Perhaps, indeed, this was the beginning of wisdom," is the final line in the book). Tiggy Johnson's ten short stories in *Svetlana or Otherwise* deal with the domestic, screaming babies, dead uncles. The title story is the strongest. For me, Sentana's "Buried Alive" and Alexander's "Second Son" seem interesting ideas, taken too far. In "Buried Alive" we hear from Sarah, who's locked up in a mental hospital, a story that's been superbly told by Janet Frame. Sentana's Sarah lacks any "oomph": she's a victim, and while the rendition is heart-felt, it's

ultimately unrevealing. “Second Son” plays with the notion of Judas, as the second son of Mary and Joseph, giving us the gossip on Jesus. Good idea, but the telling of the tale lacks drama, and Judas, like Sarah, is a too hard done by for the reader to feel really concerned about his thoughts or welfare.

After reading these five collections from Ginninderra Press, the abiding sense I had was that my meeting on the train was chaperoned, all too often overlooked by each author’s anxious presence: what is she up to? has she got the point? should I polish that sentence more?

Kathryn Lomer’s short stories are much more enticingly dressed strangers: perhaps because Lomer is herself a traveller, certainly in the imagination, presumably in reality. Her settings range from Sydney to Kyoto, via Prague and back to Lomer’s home state of Tasmania. Her practice as a poet shows: she paints in place with the succinctness and deceptive simplicity of a brush stroke in Japanese calligraphy or sumi-e. Like Thornton and Johnson, Lomer deals with relationships, with children and with aging, but she is much surer-footed as she slips among her characters, creates events which are neither too grand nor too irrelevant. “Adult education” and “Ceiling of an umbrella shop” are two particularly pleasing stories. The first recounts twenty-four hours in the life of a “Personal Assistant”, a country girl, now in Sydney, who returns alone after work to her flat in Bondi, where she tries “to be nonchalant about this arrival into emptiness”. Lomer makes something lovely—nuanced, particular, lightly told—of what could have been yet another treatment of a well-worn story. She offers, too, a twist at the end that is subtle, poignant, insightful. The more poetically titled “Ceiling of an umbrella shop” is both a cultural and a gender leap away from “Adult Education”; the “hero” is a Japanese man, the owner of an umbrella store, the story is a classic one of class, youth, lost love, sparingly told. Lomer is a chameleon and she hides herself as easily in the guise of the eighty-four year old Japanese war pilot in “Emerald Princess”, as she does in the often unnamed women who wait for long-ago lovers under the clock tower in Prague (“Kafka’s House”), or travel with men, once loved, in aging Land Rovers without a spare tyre (“Sojourn”). This makes for an interesting collection, which holds together surprisingly well: Lomer is very good at handling the “bears at the door”, each and every story is peppered with small threats, potential disruptions, the reader is always enough on edge to want to find out what happens next, even when the next is a new story altogether.

Another metaphor: short fictions are like river stones. If you take them from the water, polish the surface, you’re left with a blank faced, unyielding centre. Let them tumble and they shine by themselves. Lomer’s a tumbler, our Ginninderra Press writers need to toss themselves deeper into the river.