

Long Paddock

HEATHER TAYLOR JOHNSON

reviews Ken Bolton, *A Whistled Bit of Bop*

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In Ken Bolton's latest collection, *A Whistled Bit of Bop*, even when a poem feels disjointed – as the opening 'Double Trouble' did – it's hard to condemn. I could claim 'lack of emotion' but then humour is a valid emotion, so is lethargy. And 'disjointed' is not actually a slam in Bolton's case because it is what he does best. Who else can take a poem and cut and paste memories so that they may be strung together with the movement of the mind – in a phrase, dislodge the whole thing in order to make it whole – quite like Ken Bolton? 'But this is the same stuff he always gives us', you might say; 'what about transcendence?' Are the Rolling Stones any worse off than the Beatles for sticking with the sound that works for them? For not adding in the sitar and ringing in a new dawn? (If you say yes, we may have a problem.)

Most of Bolton's poems are versions of 'Bolton's poems', meaning they are 'Bolton-esque'. My guess is he spends a specified time to write every day, preferably over coffee at a café near his store in Adelaide, aiming at perfecting 'his style' (though he might deny it, stating the word 'perfecting' has no place in his world and, in fact, contradicts everything he is trying to do with his poetry). And sometimes he does it. Perfect it. It just might be that one poem about Cath or Gabe or art and jazz or John Forbes' poetry or his death or – basically – Ken Bolton, and in *A Whistled Bit of Bop*, that poem is 'Boundless (Sasha)'. Here, his repetition of Mary Shelley is perfect, his commentary on the English (Australian) language is perfect ('heaps!'), his dedication to his dog Pola and his partner Cath in a poem about friendship and death is perfect. And because something truly meaningful lingers, he has, indeed, perfected 'his style'. It's an intuitiveness specific to Bolton:

An email from Pam
says Sasha has died
—who might have quoted the line:
“All I want is boundless love”
His *attitude*
might have quoted that—
Sasha wouldn't

Honesty I feel he's summed up Sasha absolutely and I've no authority here – Sasha being a complete stranger to me – but I trust this kind of judgement.

Other good things about this book: various epitaphs (especially in 'Europe': "Neo-classicism? Chiefly I like its bric-a-brac." – Paul Keating), the notes in the back of the book on each of the poems, the author's photo on the back cover, the front cover and the title (so hip I feel I may have stepped back into America in the 1950s, but then that is the effect jazz seems to have on this writing). I'm also constantly impressed with the way Bolton pokes fun at himself and his intelligence. We know he writes regularly about artists and poets so isn't it delicious that he puts words like 'lyrically sensitive' in quotations, admitting his own pompous presumptions and laughing at them all along. His interest in language befits a poet, though he works with that interest in a very different way than the other major talents of our time (I'm considering him here to be a 'major talent'). He doesn't search for the 'perfect' description or word, as I have suggested – that would be too archaic, perhaps, too romantic. Rather he questions the overt use of our own vernacular. It is Australian – which is also to assume our adopted Americanisms – and it is present tense – which is also to take into consideration the history of time. Take 'Europe', which is a rolling commentary on classicism (Italy) and what is *not* (London). I don't mind a history lesson, no matter how convoluted. And just at the point of confusion, where rationalisation seems lost, he makes it work. He makes us nod, as if we *knew* all along. Bolton doesn't stand above us, even with his world travels and his superior knowledge of art and music; he stands somewhere off to the side, alone, watching us, smirking. Then he writes a poem. Includes us. Makes us feel we belong. And that we are all important, silly, enormous.

Something about 'Late Night Reading' doesn't work for me. Bolton is very good on ruminations on poets and death, so that wasn't it, but maybe the way he went about it... I could have been *drawn in* more, but then this is "Ken" (I'm relating, now, with his punctuative fetishes) and not sentimental me. But wait! He *is* sentimental. Who else would go on and on about his admiration of other artists and poets, their deaths, his friends' deaths, his appreciation of his living friends, their memories, then slip in a comment about what Cath is up to *at this moment*, or her children, for that matter. On second thought, he just may be the most sentimental poet out there. I wonder if it's the form of the poem that threw me off, the

regular stanza. His 'usual' 'disjointed' stanza works so well with the stream of consciousness we've been accustomed to following over the years with this highly original, highly regarded poet (this book, by the way, is currently shortlisted for the Age Book of the Year 2010 prize), that when he veers from it and gives us something 'normal', I'm confused. I'm missing some spark. But then I loved '(Pigeon Song) We Meet Again, Traveller'. Regular couplets; absurd discussion with a bird. In fact that poem should be linked to a comic strip. Ken Bolton should sell his poem to a graphic illustrator and see himself in the funny pages.

If you want to read Ken Bolton for the first time, I'd say pick up any Ken Bolton book, including this one. They'll all do just fine because they are, basically, the same book. If you're not a fan, pick it up and give him another go. I swear he'd have a way of eventually wearing you down. But here's the thing: if you're already a fan of Bolton, like me, then don't go past *A Whistled Bit of Bop*. The more we get to live his life along with him through his verse, the more at home we feel with him, so like all the rest of his collections, you'll love it.