

SARAH DAY

Jane Williams, *Days Like These:*  
*New and selected poems 1998-2013*  
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*Days Like These* is a new and selected volume taken from four existing collections and including a body of new work. Certain things can be said about Jane William's work as a whole. This is a social collection— its pages are peopled with vivid and tender portraits. Jane Williams is a close observer of humanity; she writes about the relationships between people, often the relationships between strangers. Public transport invites such correspondence, as do queues – in banks and supermarkets. She observes closely the effect one human can have on another, often without verbal interaction. William's world-view is a compassionate one. This is evident in all four of her preceding works and in the new poems too. She pays particular attention to the marginalised and disenfranchised and speaks up defiantly on their behalf. She glimpses into lives, predicaments, emotions, recording frustration, isolation and suffering as well as joy:

On a good day you are living in paradise  
With the forty spotted pardalote  
thriving invisibly

(“Tips for the last tourist”)

There is a compassionate radar behind many of these poems which notices and responds to those on the periphery: the child in the wheelchair, homeless people, refugees in detention, the young mother trying to cash her welfare cheque; in each case it's the specifics of the individual's circumstances that disarms, the *detail* that takes the reader close to the experience of the other.

Often it's innocence that these poems see in others:

Two girls get on a bus wearing matching mini skirts

And fake fur collared jackets      when the bus driver asks  
*What fare?* They whisper *child* like it's a great shame  
They won't have to bear for much longer  
(“Moment”)

In “Zoo”, not only is the innocence of the weeping man revealed but also his awareness of the innocence of all the others in the world, and in “Cause”,

there's a man who wakes our street  
to that hour between witching and dawn  
most used for dying and being born  
he paces and moans like he already knows  
who will be taken and who will be left alone

“[S]ome of us”, the poem concludes:

think we understand and loved ones have to hold us  
back from running out into the night ready to join  
our rusty voice to his

There is deep empathy and utmost restraint in this fine poem which, as do so many in this collection, taps into the junction where one person's raw humanness meets another's. To this end, everything works together seamlessly, aurally and rhythmically.

Many of the poems embody love, particularly love between parents and children. “Embassy”, a poem about the author's Irish father, is one of my favourites.

Many of the poems behave like short stories, or photographs in that they provide us with a fragment that gives access to a wider narrative. Jane Williams is dextrous at framing a scene, and a response: both hers and the reader's. “The Wedding Party” and “Bird vs Rat” are vivid examples of this.

Technically, verve and pace bind *Days Like These* together as a whole, give the poetry its pulse and contribute to what the author Cyril Wong, on the back cover, refers to fittingly as its “act of testimony and gorgeous defiance. “

I'd like consider finally the biblical poems that make up the bulk of the first section called “Outside Temple Boundaries”, poems that are written from the point of view of eyewitness accounts to events and stories in the Old and New Testament: Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary, those who were present at the journey of the

Stations of the Cross, God. These poems re-imagine spiritually or culturally mythologised stories and convey them via intimate and experiential voices. “11 Stations of the Cross” is a powerful and moving poem with universal themes about the way humans respond to the suffering of others, or indeed perpetrate it.

I like the voice of God in the poem called “Final Draft”. In this poem God is assessing his newly made world, a world he seems to have already had a few goes at. He’s unsure, he’s lonely; he lacks clarity, certainty. He’s ironic:

I try putting man to the North  
And woman to the East  
In between large moss covered boulders  
Self seeded olives and the fog  
  
I make the usual wager with the snake.

Later he says:

I know the ending by heart and ask again  
  
Tell me  
What do I look like?  
But the woman is gone  
And the snake is a smile  
And only fog is real.

If I had to select one thing in particular that I like about the poems in this book beside the fact that they are well-made poems, it would have something to do with their *attitude*. They observe people with a clear eye and they care. I hope that doesn’t sound trite. I don’t think its importance can be underestimated. Margaret Thatcher once famously said “There is no such thing as society, only individuals.” There is a moral sentiment at work in the pages of *Days Like These*, an assumption that we’re all, in John Donne’s words “part of the main”. Importantly, when the opportunity arises, these poems skirt around cynicism in favour of empathy.