

## *The Blue Coat*

by Elizabeth Smither.

Auckland: Auckland University Press (2013).

RRP \$24.99.

Reviewed by Terry Locke

Elizabeth Smither has reached iconic status in New Zealand literature as the first woman to hold the Te Mata Poet Laureateship (2003-2005). After publishing her first collection in her mid-30s, she now has 17 books of poetry under her girdle, as well as novels, short stories, children's books and non-fiction in a range of genres. Let me assure you that Smither does not disappoint, since she is both a standard-setter and also a standard-upholder. These poems are all goodies though the imaginative leaping in some is more agile than in others.

To get started, let's look at the poem "The marking of *The Great Gatsby*". I start here in case you're planning to have your students read the Fitzgerald masterpiece because of the impending release of Baz Luhrmann's new cinematic treatment. (By the time you read this you've probably seen the movie.) This is not one of the top poems in the book, but it's an amusingly witty piece of vitriol from a high-toned librarian who has discovered illegitimate marginalia in a library copy of the novel. It is not just the fact that the margin critique is in a book that is not the property of the critic that is galling. It is the superior attitude implicit in the comments themselves:

On page 25 someone has taken a pencil  
and underlined, quite savagely, *peremptory heart*  
and written *cliché?*

...and earns an ironically rhapsodic rebuke:

O previous reader

I'd like to garrotte you with your pencil

and something to hand from the author's desk  
a ball of string perhaps, a rubber band....

I suspect your students will be fascinated by the history of garroting, and savour the fanciful imagining of a 70-year-old, ex-librarian sedating and strangling the offender using Scott Fitzgerald's ball of string. There is a poetic lesson in all of this, of course, and this is that poems themselves can be made from anything that comes "to hand". Many of the poems in this book are like that – simple occasions which become framed in a particular way via a poetic retrospective. ("Intensive reading with Diana" is a good example of this, but is a poem with more complex depths.)

Let me switch to the idea of blue. I'm thinking of its association with imaginative transformation, prefigured in Picasso's "blue" period (with his painting of the old guitar player), taken up extensively by Wallace Stevens in poems like "The man with the blue guitar" and in the recent New Zealand context by poets like Michael Harlow (*The Tram Conductor's Blue Cap* published in 2009). Although Smither's poems tend to be ordinarily occasioned, it is the transfigurative light of the imagination that lifts them off the page.

Here is an example in its entirety – the poem "Blossoms, marshmallows":

Through the blue glass stoppered bottle  
the pink and white marshmallows have  
the look of blossoms under water.

The blue glass creates an illusion  
of soft and yielding sweetness  
carelessly piled up like little logs

cut into rounds. The real blossoms  
have a similar compactness: they turn  
inward in the triumph of being born.

What makes this poem different from “The marking of *The Great Gatsby*” is its associative inexhaustiveness. You’re not going to nail it down it with repeated readings. That’s because of the kinds of promptings at work here when you engage with it. Since I’ve been referencing Stevens, here are a few of his *Adagia* to provide us with a way into what’s going on:

Things seen are things as seen.

What we see in the mind is as real to us as what  
we see by the eye.

All of our ideas come from the natural world:  
trees = umbrellas.

We live in the mind.

Let’s imagine the occasion: the speaker observing a literal object, a “blue glass stoppered bottle” containing “pink and white marshmallows”. The verb in the self-contained first stanza is phrasal: “have the look of”. A connection is made between the marshmallows and “blossoms under water” (rather like a simile except that it is not so much the likeness itself that is the focus, but rather the process that *engenders* the sense of likeness).

The verb suggests that the likeness stems from a quality in the object, which is true up to a point. (Another adage asserts: “The real is only the base. But it is the base.”) But the agency that manages the transfiguration is also a quality in the glass (it’s blueness) and this quality also extends to the *way of seeing* of the speaker. It is the speaker who elicits the figurative object of “blossoms under water” from her image-bank. She may or may not have at some time *seen* blossoms under water. The key fact is that she has now *imagined* them.

In the second stanza, the “blue glass” again assumes a kind of agency in the process of creating an illusion, where the literal object is presented (via synecdoche) in terms of a quality (“soft and yielding sweetness”) and compared (by a simile) with “little logs / cut into rounds”. The use of the word “illusion” is compellingly apt on two counts: 1. the quality indicated is *unlike* the hardness of the figurative object (“logs”); 2. an appropriate quality has *not* been focused on. Something different would be happening had the speaker used the words “jumble of cylinders” instead of “soft and yielding sweetness”. (The latter also suggests the quality of a typical Mills and Boon heroine.)

In the last two and a half lines, the imagined blossoms have now become the literal object of contemplation and logs *and* marshmallows are now the figurative object, with the point of connectedness being the quality of “compactness”. However, in the last line and a half, there is a spectacular imaginative leap, as the blossoms (“they”), which are now “real”, assume agency as they “turn / inward”. Here the process of turning inward is associated with “the triumph of being born”. What does that mean? Well, it can mean a number of things. For instance, it could mean that we ourselves *become* through a process of active introspection that builds on the real. It could be an instance of:

“We live in the mind.” The poem evokes Stevens because his own poetic project was very much about the drama of seeing and about how life itself, at its most intense, at its most rich, involves a constant transactiveness (if I might coin such a word) between the real and the imagined.

There is more I could say about this book. For instance, it has been carefully constructed as a sequence, with details or themes or one poem being taken up in a subsequent one, and so on. But this is a short review, and something of a taster. Buy the book.

## *Where the Wind Wills*

*by Christina G. Ferens*

*Faith House Publications, 2012*

*ISBN 978-0-473-14839-3*

**Reviewed by Alastair Crawford, Hagley  
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The cover of this book bears resemblance to a slice of toast, gradations of brown and gray giving way occasionally to darker areas of near black. Within the covers the lengthy explanations of blackbirds in the crabapple tree and silvereyes disturbing leaves above them might be used by teachers as examples of the use of specific nouns in creative writing, and their soporific nature could quell the unruliest of back row literary detractors. Prospective readers looking for a classroom teaching text might also view this book as an excellent example of setting, or as an even better example of the dangers of omitting dialogue, character and events from a story. If teaching the creative writing activity ‘now and then’ the book could be presented as an almost continuous then, suggesting after 177 pages the value of a contrasting ‘now’.

The epilogue beginning “If ever a place can again hold thrall, it is the country garden...” would certainly spur desperate students to suggest what other topics might also hold thrall. But the teaching begins with the very title itself: *Where the Wind Wills* - alliteration or onomatopoeia? Or teach the prediction of content from the title. Could it be a book about the winding up of wills, dying intestate and financial responsibility?

If you’re daydreaming of retiring and spending the rest of your life in the garden, this will certainly let you know exactly what garden life is like.

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