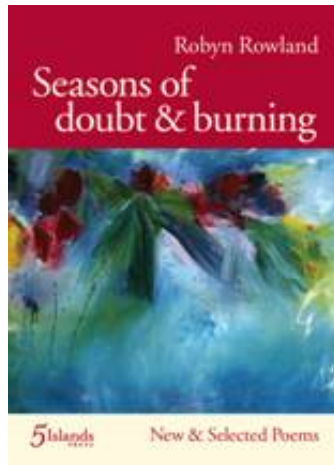


TEXT review**Seasons of Doubt and Burning***review by Jay Daniel Thompson*

Robyn Rowland

Seasons of Doubt and Burning: New and Selected Poems

Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2010

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Robyn Rowland rose to prominence as a Women's Studies academic before reinventing herself as a poet. *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* is a collection of Rowland's verse from across three decades. The collection makes for a lyrical and moving read.

The key motif of this collection is nature. Rowland takes her reader through bushfires, across windswept beaches and around the Great Ocean Road. The poems unfold in Australia, Ireland, East Timor. Throughout the collection, Rowland draws connections between the natural world and such diverse issues as childbirth, death, war, cancer, old age, domestic violence, and adolescent sexuality.

The most impressive aspect of *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* is Rowland's careful and imaginative eye for detail. Witness the following description of the wildlife that was ravaged during the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983:

Trees bent hurrying form the blast
are kiln-baked stiff against the slopes,
or near Anglesea, their heads glossy,
still hold the garish colour of flame.
Hills have a two-day stubble
their grubby nudity embarrassing and haunting
(138)

These passages are almost cinematic in their vividness. Many readers

would not have witnessed the natural disaster mentioned above, or be familiar with the locations that Rowland cites, but she gives us a strong mental image of what she has (presumably) observed.

As might be evident, the book explores the myriad ways in which the natural world shapes our experience of our bodies and emotions, as well as our perception of the obstacles we encounter in our daily lives. In the above passage, fire-damaged hills are transformed into naked, injured humans. Elsewhere, Rowland writes of her battle with breast cancer:

The tick of time
might camouflage a rush of fuse;
that creak of bone, sharp ache in the hip
could be shrapnel from the first blast;
the small dent or is it a subtle knob of flesh,
could be the landmine that escaped detection –
another breast gone. (152)

In this piece, cancers become ‘landmines’, as well as the ‘terrorists’ who have planted these landmines (152). The cancerous ‘terrorists’ hide within deceptively idyllic ‘green fields’, and have ‘laid waste’ to any certainty about a happy and healthy future (152-3). The poem ends with Rowland reflecting wistfully on ‘another country’ where ‘the surprise of death / arising early / never clouds the blue sky’ (153).

The political awareness that runs through *Seasons of Doubt and Burning* is unsurprising given Rowland’s professional background. In her poem ‘Ink, paper, voice’, Rowland suggests why poetry is a useful medium for writers to convey their views (ideological and otherwise):

Poetry and music carry us through the little
deaths, and the great;
float us along a current we still imagine is
endless,
though we know better. (35)

This passage follows the spirit of Audre Lorde’s essay ‘Poetry is not a Luxury’ (1977). For both Lorde and Rowland, poetry-writing is not a frivolous or abstract endeavour. In true feminist style, poetry helps transform the personal into the political. Poets can use a variety of literary techniques (including metaphor) to provide new and unique perspectives on different aspects of society.

Yet while this collection is politically-aware, Rowland avoids disguising ideology as verse. She does not encourage her readers to ‘take sides’ on any issue. Consider, for example, the poem entitled ‘Snap frozen’. In this piece, Rowland remembers when (as a child) she witnessed her sister being photographed by a male stranger on a beach. This stranger asked her sister to ‘slip her swimsuit strap / off her shoulder’ (20). Rowland connects this memory with the 2008 controversy surrounding Bill Henson’s photographs of semi-naked adolescent girls. As she puts it, the long-ago photograph of her sibling has returned ‘in another thirteen year old girl, /so lovely the photo, so uncertain the child’ (21):

You want to know by whose hand
 she became naked, like that. Who
 procured the normalising of the voyeur;
 made the choice of camera and the word 'art'
 an acceptable dividing line
 between beach and studio;
 while nausea rises again in the
 watcher on the beach
 and in the watched? (21)

Rowland signals that she will not frame the Henson case as yet another 'art/pornography' debate. The very term 'art' is rendered problematic: why do we use this term to describe a photo of a young girl that has been taken in a studio by a stranger, but not a similar photo that has been snapped by a stranger 'on the beach'? Both Rowland and the reader are placed in the position of 'the watcher': Rowland watches her sister pose for the man, while the reader 'watches' the sister, the teenage Rowland and also Henson's teenage model. The viewer is left to speculate on how 'the watched' girls of this poem feel about being the object of a stranger's desiring gaze.

The only weak spot in this collection is the poem entitled 'The Fallen'. This piece pays homage to Susan Hawthorne's novel *The Falling Woman* (1992). Rowland's intertextual source is appropriate: Hawthorne is herself a well-known Australian feminist poet who has written extensively on corporeality and nature. Yet 'The Fallen' seems to be merely an excuse to rework the key motif in Hawthorne's text (a body that falls – metaphorically and sometimes literally – through time and space). The homage aspect of this poem could have been more effective had the piece been developed more fully (it runs for a little under two pages).

Seasons of Doubt and Burning covers some bleak territory, but it is never depressing. Rowland's use of poetry to explore confronting and difficult issues is commendable. Her elegant, evocative verse will hopefully endear this collection to a broad readership.

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