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In Under This Saffron Sun, Australian poet Robyn Rowland describes her travels through Turkey

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Books

- Under This Saffron Sun, by Robyn Rowland. Knocknarene Press. \$22.



Robyn Rowland's poetry has sensuous descriptions of travelling through Turkey. Picture: Shutterstock

Australian poet Robyn Rowland has had a 35-year connection with Ireland. More recently, she's developed a comparable link with Turkey, leading initially to her well-received bilingual collection, *This Intimate War*:

Gallipoli/Canakkale 1915, which was simultaneously translated into Turkish by Mehmet Ali Celikel.

While the earlier book confined itself to the claustrophobic proximity of the trenches in 1915 Gallipoli, *Under This Saffron Sun* opens out into a lyrical account of Rowland's travels across Turkey and her encounters with its language and culture.

Most of the works here are travel poems of a high order. A few are poignant souvenirs of an older foreign woman's encounters with Turkish men who are clearly too young to be "suitable". Such delicate friendships lend the book a confessional charge it might not otherwise have.

The early poems remind us of what a sensuous poet Rowland can be. She's always looking for new ways to convey the exact shade of a tile, the distinctiveness of an aroma. Not atypical are these lines from "Night Opening on Istanbul": "Scaled, the shining fish glint in an old wire barbecue frame / before they are slapped over turmeric flames, seared black, / salted and coursing olive-green with oil. Hungrily / we tear them apart, stuff them between slabs of bread."

As the book develops, Rowland faces phenomena which are less hedonistic and more problematic. Among others, they include (in "Earth's Children") the recurrent persecutions of the cave dwellers in Cappadocia ("Romans with their gladiatorial lust, Arabs / with their whooping cries ...").

More immediately distressing is "Men are Afraid", Rowland's poem about the shooting of one of her translator's young

students by that student's ex-husband. The poet, stunned, can only ask questions. "Husband once, / what did he fear, that robber, that thief, / who stole her life, blew away her breath?"

No less disconcerting is "On the Beach", a poem about Syrian refugees setting out for Greece from Turkey. It begins with a "a bride in glorious white froth, laughing" in the shadow of a beached ship. The poet reports also that: "Across the narrow Mytilini Strait on Lesbos, women / are beachcombing too. They collect children's clothing washed up. / They itemise, they clean it for those who might still come, / who survive crossing the sea of death that gulps them by the boatload."

This reviewer is in no position to comment on Mehmet Ali Celikel's translations, but it's not hard to imagine the book's Turkish readers may also be enthused by Rowland's lyrical and frank evocation of their country and culture.

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UNDER THIS
Robyn Rowland SAFFRON SUN

SAFRAN *Turkish Translations / Türkçeleştiren*
by Mehmet Ali Çelikel
GÜNEŞİN ALTINDA