Following the wagons: A poetic trail by Kimberly K Williams (Liquid Amber Press, 2026), launched by Jen Webb

I have seen and heard some of this work as Kimberly developed it across the period of her doctoral candidature, and it turns out to be at least as impressive as I found it during that gestation period of thinking and researching and testing out and evaluating that she conducted over the years of her research training.

It is an important topic – ever more important as we watch the social, economic and political gains women won across the 20th century be attacked or rejected in the 21st century. This collection of poetry that records and re-embodies the women of the 19th century and all they faced, and all they achieved, is to be celebrated and embraced.

The poems offer a tapestry of empathy, alongside evidence of that splinter of ice in the heart possessed by creative writers, and presented in language that surprises, and offers a powerful sense of place, location, and the feeling of being. It is a masterclass in both historical and place-based work for poetry, and for phenomenology as a framework for thinking, feeling and perceiving, and recording this. The design of each poem, many of them exploded— scattered across the pages—and others contained into shapes of phrases, lines and stanzas, call up for me the vast spaces of the 19th century north American land mass, and its topology and geography. Poetic design as geophysical cartography.

Kimberly reads her poems in a blend of light tone and 'grain of the voice'. In her readings one can hear the exhaustion of these women as they trudge across a continent they do not know; contemplate dangers they don't know how to meet; address the exigencies of their time and context:

> We come across the Baptists. They ask: *Are you leaning on the Lord*? I want to answer that our wagon will not lean unless the ruts demand it and then we risk going over. I want to mention
>
> there is no road. No trail. There is nothing
> to lean against. Not even a post.
>
> We pass emptiness for days – only us moving in one direction, wind in the other. And then when you do cross, they want you to lean.
>
> But you cannot tell
> this to the Baptists.

This emptiness recalls settler Australia's term 'terra nullius'; here too the invaders saw the country as empty—because you cannot see in its fullness something you don't know how to see. That sense of emptiness, and the narrative and imagery of many of the poems, also recalls me to the accounts I learned as a child, of the South African Voortrekkers, who were, effectively, driven out of the Cape by the English colonialists, and like Kimberley's women, set off into the interior of an unknowledge continent with nothing but ox wagons, bare supplies, and an overwhelming trust in their severe god. In both contexts, African and North American, there are struggles, sufferings, and deaths – those they endured and those they caused – staged in the exquisite, often dangerous landscapes through which they travelled. And again like the Voortrekkers, whose descendants developed apartheid, the descendants of these US trekkers contributed to the building of a local often brutal economy, and it's worth remembering this, without ignoring the ordeal, and the resilience of those whose feet were on what was, for them, unknown territory, and who managed with little but their own wits.

The voices of the women, whether named as historical figures, or compilations of those found in the archives, are highly individual. They observe, and recount their observations. They engage with others and record that too. They have fears and nightmares, moments of enchantment and hope. They write letters home, hoping they will reach their addressees. They bury their babies along the way, knowing they have to leave their little bodies behind. They bury so many along the way – which is, for them, a journey marked by death. In the section taken from Cecelia McMillen Adams' 1852 diary are lists of the number of graves they pass each day, the number of dead cattle they pass, the number of dead horses, in an devastating illumination of this experience of loss.

The grief is sometimes overwhelming; as is the determination of these women not to collapse, not to give in. Their pragmatism is what allows them to live; for instance, the poetica persona supports a woman whose little son has just died, and then thinks:

> I cannot abide the euphemisms: *passed away, gone, crossed over, off to heaven, be at peace. At rest*. It is not about belief. It is about presence and absence. Here & not here. Alive & dead. If you are not alive in this world, then you are dead in it. No matter what happens to you following. You are here in this world, or you are not. If you are not here, you are not yet born, or you are already dead.

This collection ends with a miscellany of voices, perspectives, letters, thoughts; on page 55, a one-page poem weaves together in lines and stanzas and boxes of words a synopsis of the whole section. There are, comparatively speaking, few words extant for so many lives – those lost en route, those lost at their destination, those lost because they never really had the opportunity to be. Yet in those few words are records of love; and of beautiful moments; and of community and

connectedness. It left me a bit tearful, but glad to have heard these voices, perceived their perceptions on what it was like—or what Kimberly assesses it must have been like—to leave a world behind, and walk into the unknown, and keep walking.

I will finish with the last bit of the last poem in this collection: a set of words that respond to Barsina Rogers French, age 13 in 1867, who was practising her penmanship:

The current sucks

us in spits us
out
the eddy.

Small stitches
enclose
frayed
nerves.

Jen Webb

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Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor Emerita of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Originally from South Africa, she came to Canberra by way of New Zealand, Canada, the UK, the WA outback, and central Queensland. She is a poet and cultural theorist, whose academic works include Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts (with Caroline Turner; Manchester UP, 2016); and Gender and the Creative Labour Market (with S Brook et al., Palgrave 2022). Her recent poetry collections include Moving Targets (2018), Flight Mode (with Shé Hawke, 2020), and The Daily News (2024; shortlisted for the ACT Poetry Book of the Year 2025). Her scholarly work focuses on the field of creative production, and its relationship to society more broadly; her poetry focuses on material poetics, prose poetry, and questions of seeing.