

Book launch

Cath Kenneally, *The Green Room*

Readings Carlton

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Jo Langdon

It is a pleasure to be part of this celebration of Cath Kenneally's new collection—and eighth book of poetry—*The Green Room*. These poems invite us in—as you might guess, into green spaces, green bodies, of water: the seas, lakes and rivers of this blue planet, and the associations and perceptions we as human readers bring and form in response to them.

Dedicated 'to merfolk everywhere', the bodies of water Cath forms, shapes, recalls and represents here in language also invite us to embody variously uncanny experiences, familiar and strange, charged with dreamlike, otherworldly qualities, where we are, in the poet's words, 'held between earth and air / in green-gold, dispersed, fractured light / shot through with darts of sun' (1).

An exciting new addition to Liquid Amber Press' list of titles, and the press' particular focus on poetry that connects with other forms of art—visual, musical, performative—I was especially interested to learn that this collection started as an ekphrastic series responding to the South Australian-based visual artist Chris De Rosa's sculptural work, 'SeaWeeding', which I've learned comprises large-scale papier-mâché sculptures, screen prints, etchings and digital prints based on sea plants, algae and spongia. An example of De Rosa's luminous work graces the book's beautiful cover.

And the title of Cath's book of course also connects with the name for a backstage room, in a theatre or similar, where artists can go between performances, though I can't help but also think of the 'great green room' of Margaret Wise Brown's picture book *Goodnight Moon*, with its telephone, and red balloon, and cow jumping over the moon... More explicitly and directly in these pages, the allusive and intertextual conversations of this book are extensive: generative, generous, expansive, they invite into dialogue a range of interlocutors from Baby Shark (doo doo doo doo), to Elaine Morgan and her pioneering 1972 text, *The Descent of Woman*, (quote, in the poet's words:) 'propounding the theory of the Aquatic Ape / us as seagoing primates' (9), to the Beatle Ringo Starr's Octopus's Garden, to *Wind in the Willows*,

to the Modernist short story author Katherine Mansfield, to the writer and sometimes-documentary star Tim Winton (to whom I'll return) ... to name just some.

Aidan Coleman's cover endorsement for Cath's book notes the humour and 'epigrammatic charm' of Cath's poetry, which I recognised quickly in entering these poems and the titular 'green rooms' they comprise: Cath's voice is often witty and playful in capturing—and responding to—the familiar-unfamiliar pull of water. The poem 'night swims', for examples, ends: 'the wet: it swallows you / sweeps you off your feet' (12). Other poems have a postcard-like, snapshot quality—a moment (held) in time, place, space: whether at Collioure, on the Mediterranean coast of southern France, or in the Adriatic... (13). One of the collection's shorter poems, 'washed up' (33), I'd like to read in full.

Across this body of work, the sea can be a space of fierce, bracing beauty, 'places where breakers roll in' as 'glass-green, ice-clear / heartstoppers' (3); and it can be a space of comfort, community, with bodies 'cocooned in the Women's Pool / carved into the rock shelf at Coogee' (7). During my writing of this launch speech, my partner reminded me of a recent shark attack at Coogee Beach, potentially complicating my classifications here; of course, these poems too remind us how vulnerable and precarious the human body, human life, is, just 'a dot' (13) in the ocean, where 'you can't remain / without gulps of sky' (1); how 'the sea is unmoved' (8) by us.

These poems are also in conversation with the innumerable nonhuman inhabitants of seas and other water bodies—a Leopard Seal, plovers, oyster-catchers, 'loggerhead turtles / orcas and humpbacks, / rays and sharks' (51), to name just some—while remaining alert to anthropomorphism and anthropocentric viewpoints and assumptions, reflecting, asking, for example: 'what can we really know of birds? / we make it up' (35).

In this age of AI slop, AI theft and environmental destruction—a recent SBS headline based on findings from the United Nations suggests 'AI data centres [are] set to consume more water than every person on Earth by 2030'¹—along with other forces contributing to the climate emergency, it is, of course, impossible to ignore the politics of water. The poems of *The Green Room* speak explicitly to the climate crisis in which 'Europe swelters', with 'fires ringing London' (48), and, closer to home, 'the reef's edge on fire' (50), while (quote) 'pollies in quiet Adelaide / outlaw urban protest' (51). In the book's penultimate poem,

¹ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/ai-data-centre-impact-resources-un-report-carbon-emissions-water-land-energy-use/6ua0aviz7>

‘sleepers’, ‘we contemplate / extinction / Tim plods on / teeming ghost-crabs / at his feet’
(51).

I anticipate these poems will leave readers reflecting on their own experiences with and relationships to water, their own personal, political points of reference (as a reader I couldn’t help but think of former PM Scott Morrison’s 2019 ‘I don’t hold a hose, mate’ comment during the Black Summer bushfires, or his ‘I stopped these’ office trophy in the shape of a fishing boat—and of successive Australian leaders’ obsession with ‘stopping the boats’).

Not only do these poems invite us into the green spaces, rooms, realms they represent as sensory experiences formed in language, they invite us to join vital conversations. I hope you will accept the invitations they issue. Congratulations, to Cath, and to Liquid Amber Press, on this exciting, exquisite addition to oz-po. May *The Green Room* find many readers, and invite them to swim the lines and images composed here.