

Book Review: *After Spruce: Poems in the Manner of Tom Jenks' "Spruce" During the Time of the Coronavirus Pandemic* by Clay Thistleton

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“[Freud’s] descriptions fit the picture of Hitler no less than the idealizations into which the American demagogues try to style themselves. In order to allow narcissistic identification the leader has to appear himself as absolutely narcissistic.”

– Theodore Adorno, *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*. (1951).

Into the apparently peaceful Bega Shire comes Clay Thistleton’s *After Spruce: Poems in the Manner of Tom Jenks' "Spruce" During the Time of the Coronavirus Pandemic*.

It is an intense ride through our experience of the coronavirus epidemic, in which certain Australian politicians and President Trump feature prominently. As I write on the eve of Mr Trump's second term (he said: "together we stand on the verge of the greatest four years in the history of our country"), Thistleton I imagine will be suffering a blend of despair at the world and pleasure at the chance of acquiring more readers.

And he deserves these: in my view this is one of the best poetry books to come out of the shire for some years. His mixture of fury and humour, intellect and bewilderment is finely balanced within the verse structure. This throughout is in tercets, Jenks' 'juxtapositional tercets'. We can read across poems on facing pages, or even in some pieces read the lines on both pages randomly to get the field effect. Or we can read sideways one of the nine lines of the tercets: the ninth lines mostly referring to the word "tears"; or the fifth, central lines to a specific political administration, for examples. Despite the juxtapositional tercet, it may be that the term matrix is better suited to Thistleton's work. It is closely structured but never rigid: nothing feels forced despite the force of the polemic. It is not only the facing pages that have juxtapositions: the book as a whole is cross-referenced in many ways. One could argue that the book is a single long poem.

Lines are dense, but Thistleton has an almost flawless sense of rhythm: another part of the matrix. Subversive acts of language and neologisms abound within an unrelenting assault on the reality we are all supposed to agree to. Indeed, some of the verses, notably the opener, have an almost hallucinatory quality: as if we were teetering on the edge. It is one of the aspects that ensure this text will transcend the local: meaning that it is a valuable record of the pandemic, and, like all good poetry, has a wider and deeper relevance within which society is frankly interrogated by its citizens. Also, good endnotes were a wise move.

Sardonic, sarcastic, scathing; hilarious; meticulously de-cliqued; skipping across poems and along poems without losing the rhythm or the greater meaning; relentless complexity, even fear. These intelligent pieces are for poetry lovers: they will not likely appeal to general readers (in general). Readers might prefer to take a few sittings to get through these twenty-two concentrated pages and savour them.

During COVID our politicians had the unenviable task of working out what to do in a rapidly evolving situation, with insufficient data or time to consider what data they did have, a population at a level of science ignorance that would have bothered Plato 2,500 years ago, and, most difficult of all, a population that was justifiably frightened. Some did not live up to expectations, some had apparently fatal policies: Thistleton pillories these few ruthlessly: "the criminal negligence of the Sydney bin chicken" (p. 28) / "Donald J. Trump is the King of all

Ventilators” (p. 12) / “gain of function research on the inert prime minister” (p. 30) / “mixed messaging at the shredding session” (p. 29) / “the Trump administration hangs rotten on the vine | with obese flailing turtles and faithless electors” (p. 20).

Make no mistake, this poetic book is intended as a weapon: a piercing account of the times. As such it is a sophisticated and multilayered work. It returns me to the excellent drawing of a pangolin on the front cover, to look again. Why does its tongue make a right angle towards the end? Is that look really innocent? Has it been vaccinated?

Mr Trump has returned, democratically elected; COVID, a masterwork of biological engineering, will be back, one way or another. Thistleton’s poems will help us through both of these twenty-first century scenarios, and in addition leave us better equipped to face AI and whatever menace ‘they’ come up with next.

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