

News of the World: *A Stone Dog* by Aidan Semmens

Out of the wreckage of *The News of World* has emerged something of true aesthetic and moral value – the poetry of Aidan Semmens. Semmens was a sports editor on the newspaper, and the attentiveness and dogged curiosity of the professional journalist is evident in the sharp and intelligent observations of these poems, as well as their incisive, almost surgical technique and attention to the ‘matter’ under scrutiny in any particular poem. The poet is at pains to point out, ‘the inadequacy of an inattentive life’ (p. 26).

A note in the acknowledgments informs us that, ‘“The Good News” is a reworking of material that first appeared in 1985,’ indicating these poems are an accumulation of many years’ work, and strangely prophetic of our present conditions, true to the shamanist status of the poet as seer, overriding the journalist as recorder. As Semmens remarks in ‘The Uncertainty Principle’ (p. 45): ‘I think I’ll love this country more / in its coming dereliction’. And this difficulty of seeing, of performing the moral purpose of the poet, is a worry Semmens returns to, to worry at again and again. A key poem to the book, ‘Depicting the Artist As,’ where ‘the self is a site for chaos,’ reveals this state to be an agency for holding disparate (and desperate) things together, where the poem is best place for this function of language to occur. This is a key methodology of this book:

we see Allied fighters in formation above a landscape
a life rebuilt from attic fragments
the family photo is deliberately blurred

in seeing these things we see the difficulty of seeing anything
(p.26)

In this age of information overload (and the journalist on a major national newspaper is at the crux of that site, and is aware of this state of affairs more fully than the rest of us), where what we are told, or find through the world wide web, appears the truth, but is even more ambiguous and uncertain than ever before, this is a book of poems that demonstrates why poetry is urgent news, an art form that finds its strength and power through revealing ambiguities and opening out the language in ‘the difficulty of seeing anything’. It is the play (in the most serious of senses) and offering up of difficulty, which marks out this collection as a book to fully engage with. The poem comes to rest on factual and highly contentious ambiguity: the questionable deaths of Gudrun Ensslin and other members of the Red Army Faction on the night of 17th October 1977:

... almost beyond belief
the hanging body of Gudrun Ensslin
nothing could be further from the truth
(p.26)

The fact of Ensslin’s death is without doubt. How she got to be hanged, we will never really know – there will always be stories generated around this most notorious of deaths. The argument about these kinds of ambiguities is a conversation that takes

place the length and breadth of the book, and comes to re-emerge in poems like ‘What Then Must We Do’ (pp. 70-71). The title echoing Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done*, maps the collapse of history into the ever present, where historical perspective and the dimensions of time no longer hold. In parallel the ‘information’ and ‘story’ of the news are one, so the Nazi regime has literary succeeded in ending history. The Second World War tips into Afganistan, into Iraq:

Germany, 1938:
tanks roll
in newsreel glory
making ready
for the end of history
nothing to come
hereafter

a drone that could be overhead
percussive firefight in what passed
for a street, reduced to cabaret scenery
(pp. 70-71)

The poem continues, and questions, worrying at the poet’s place as witness and the place of the journo as a reporter of events, what truth are they seeking, and what truth are they seeing:

poets & old pros
stagger under this mulch
from the multinational propa-
gator: which side
do we give credit?
(p.71)

A Stone Dog is a modern, a contemporary book, because it takes a form of lyricism as a form of truth telling in poems such as, ‘In Passing,’ with the lyric beauty of a line like, ‘a candle in an airless room,’ which we can read with a kind of poise and beauty we might find in the quiet poems of Lee Harwood, and that this kind of aesthetic has a strength and truth in the face of where we all are now:

in this political climate
we make our bed & lie –
a difficult berth
(p.62)

Where we are now: in our uncertain future, and the impossibility, it seems, of existing in this world without compromise: we make our bed, and then we lie, lie down to die, or lie through our teeth to the extent that Semmens cannot complete the statement, leaving us with a dash, a dash to the next poetic ambiguity of ‘a difficult berth,’ the berth and resting place of the death bed, or on the other side of the pun, to a new life. Which neatly brings us to the religious language of this book, begging the question of where belief, something to believe in, might lie in this collection. The trappings and furniture of belief are brought up uneasily against the paraphernalia of contemporary

life, and seems to have been drained of its original significances to re-emerge in unexpected places: 'god as precursor of CCTV' (p.60).

A Stone Dog is an eminently quotable book, and what makes it an exciting one is how it reveals the observer or auditor mapping connection: how the poem is our hope in this culture of mass communication, as a moral imperative, a moral act, laying bare how we discover and make connection to the world and to others in fundamentals:

the observer is a necessary
part of the landscape
(p.27)

to find

the bird is a bird
the thrush is a thrush
the mushroom is a mushroom
(p.27)

-- **Simon Smith**