

Book launch

Jo Langdon, *Glass Life*

Geelong Library & Heritage Centre

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I am extremely excited to be launching Jo Langdon's *Glass Life* today. I am excited because it is such a powerful, and beautiful, work of poetry. But I am also excited because I have known Jo for many years; as a student, as a colleague, and as a friend. Jo is not only a superb poet, but she is an exceptional person, committed to her students, and more generally to social justice, in a way rarely seen. And Jo is not interested in social justice in purely abstract ways, but through action, by dealing with real people. Not surprisingly, then, the relationship between the poetic and the real is a central concern of *Glass Life*, Jo's first full-length collection of poetry, published by a publisher equally notable for its sense of commitment, Five Islands Press.

So: Jo is not just an exceptional poet, but she is also an exceptional teacher, and reader. The three things—writer, reader, teacher—are (rightly) shown to be continuous in Jo's practice and her body of work. The creative act of writing poetry is mirrored in the creative, interpretive act of reading poetry. No poet can entirely ignore the past. To be utterly original would mean being unintelligible. But one cannot simply repeat the past. The tension between repetition and innovation is something that all good poets struggle with. *Glass Life* is indeed a powerfully original work on the relationship between the present and the past. As the artful allusions, quotations, and borrowings of *Glass Life* beautifully demonstrate, there is no vision without revision.

Jo is such a powerful poet, I am suggesting, because she is such a strong reader—of the cultural world and the natural world. Indeed, one of the strengths of this collection is how powerfully, and poetically, it shows these two worlds to be always inextricably bound together. We see this especially in the many poems concerned with travel, such as 'Negation', which ends with these memorable lines concerning the poet travelling in Europe:

Views—like words—flare & go:
so many clock towers, so
many Virgins
watching pale & draped
in forest-side grottos.

One of the strengths of *Glass Life* is that it evokes both a rich worldliness and an intense sense of the local. Like so many of her peers, Jo's poetry is very much a transnational one, showing that when it comes to creativity, national borders are largely irrelevant. This collection beautifully represents the poet inhabiting both a Northern world (European, cold, distant) and a Southern World (Australian, warm, nearby). We see the northern, European imaginary in poems such as 'Stadtspark' (named after the City Park in Vienna):

Rehearsing words
our breath is frozen, hanging on air.

The river has melted & a bike unzips
a current of water

until the rider comes off sideways.

On the bank, noisy apparitions
drink strawberry juice & vodka from tall bottles.

Late snow lines the branches of trees, its glitter
not as I'd imagined.

This is played against the southern imagery of an Australian abode, as seen in 'Pevensey Street' (a street very near here):

These north-facing windows frame
a weird architecture of slate & silver:

curvature of chimneys;
satellite skeletons
 reptilian, flattened.

Below a green sling of hill
the shore of foam & shell
 sunlicked, littered.

As these last lines show, with their exceptional use of rhyme and half-rhyme, Jo is very much in control of the technical aspects of poetry. But they also show that Jo's interest in Northern and Southern imaginaries is not merely a facile contrast between Australian nature and European sophistication. Jo shows that we have moved way past that old binary opposition.

There is an almost Keatsian sensuality, a lushness of being, in all of these poems, even as they are formally austere. Rich or austere, these poems show how the everyday is a major source of poetic power.

A clock's tick inside her wrist
& the day is slow.

Bathwater dried in book pages,
the kettle singing by itself. ('Aqua')

In the superb final poem, called 'Trapeze', the contemporary everyday and the strangeness of history come together in an extraordinary feat of lyric imagining. The poet's predecessor, the subject of the poem, lands very close to the poet's current abode.

But to return to my opening comments concerning Jo's commitment to social justice, *Glass Life* is subtly, if powerfully, political. Most, if not all, of these poems predate the #metoo movement, but they are very much of this moment. The poem I quoted from earlier, 'Negation', begins with the speaker of the poem remembering moments in which she is sexually harassed by men. The images of clock towers and grottoed Virgin Marys take on a new weight in such a context. Just as the poems in this collection are concerned with finding a place in the world, they are also concerned with finding a place, or a voice, in a world of men. It is not simply for purely poetic reasons, then, that words are both so weighty and so light in *Glass Life*.

And perhaps, ultimately, or at least for today, this is what *Glass Life* is about; finding a place in the world and gifting that world with words. As the haunting dream poem, 'Talo', puts it:

The horses are home,
the house the thing

you fall back to:

held open spaces
that haunt like a dream.

I am thrilled, and honoured, to help *Glass Life* make its way into the world, a world it will help make a better place.