

Sofie Westcombe's *Timestamps*

Kathleen Syme Library

Saturday 3 August

I wish to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered tonight, and pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

I am delighted to be launching Sofie's beautiful book of poems this evening. Tonight's launch is perhaps particularly special in a way that's bittersweet, with *Timestamps* comprising what might be the penultimate collection and launch—if not a swansong—for Five Islands Press, which has announced it will cease to publish new titles after this year. In its three decades (plus) of publishing, Five Islands has contributed immeasurably to Australian poetry, and to the community that is 'Australian literature', publishing a diverse range of titles and voices—and as I now know firsthand, with the utmost care and dedication to their authors. Well before I had any real aspirations to write and publish poetry of my own, I counted many Five Islands books and authors among my favourites in poetry. Five Islands Press books have always been beautifully produced—they are gorgeous objects—and they have consistently comprised poetry of exciting quality. Sofie's debut collection, which we are of course here tonight to celebrate, is no exception.

An internet definition proposes that, as 'a record in printed or digital form that shows the time at which something happened or was done', a timestamp is 'sometimes accurate to a small fraction of a second'. This is indeed true to the startling precision with which Sofie's poems attend to the spaces that they inhabit, record and transform—that is, mediate and recreate through the substance that is language. For their precision, though, Sofie's poems are also wonderfully oblique, trusting their reader to follow their cues—perhaps not so much for threads of narrative or meaning, though there are certainly stories here: these spare poems create textual artefacts that draw from the everyday and familiar—experiences that many readers will recognise: love and friendship, overseas travel, festival-going, day-to-day commuting and house-sharing, the sharing of meals and cigarettes, and experiences and memories of childhood and family life, to name but a handful.

More than pure or mimetic records of experience, or narratives in verse, however, Sofie's poems show an attentiveness to the startling ways in which language and form can create, transform and negotiate limits, and to lyric poetry's propensity for estrangement, brevity and intensity—which might be another way of saying poetry's propensity for executing paradoxes and dissolving or testing oppositions.

There is often a tension between what's at the surface of these poems—snatches of dialogue and moments of keen description, whether of 'mountains like bad / Paintings' or 'a vapour Seahorse / Growing vapour / Legs', to draw two examples from the book at hand—and what's withheld. Indeed, these poems pulse with subtext or nuance, and often achieve seamless tonal shifts, veering from humour to pathos with an understated energy and quiet confidence that confirms their careful crafting and their polish.

Sofie also demonstrates a keen ear and eye for the world's readymade poetry—moments of observation or overhearing, often involving unexpected interlocutors or interruptions; in the poem 'Break', there is 'A guy yelling over the bridge. / Drunk or just / Upset.' Another poem, 'Flypaper', opens:

Make a go of it!
Says an old man in the mouth of a garage,
The spent cigarettes doing black wonders.

Wonders, in the sense of wonderment, are also at the heart of many of these poems, especially those focalised through, recalling or observing a child's point of view. In 'Critters', for example, a voice breaks in to muse: 'But / where do the ants / Put their TVs?' More sombrely, in the poem 'Rust', we read:

A boy from school
Saw his mum cry.

There isn't a comeback for that.

The poems of this collection are also notable for their taut lines and vivid fragments; indeed, Sofie's enjambments attest to the power of the line break and its impact on elements of the

poem such as syntax and shape; the potential for *play* and the estrangement of sentences, and the way the poems work visually on the page. We see this in poems such as ‘Mate’, where each line contains a unit of meaning that is built on and/or complicated by the next in a cumulative way:

... the blemished ocean to the right.
He is the most attentive listener
You ever lied to.

These poems often also achieve a wry humour, as in ‘Camp’, where the poem’s opening lines inhabit a familiar voice and capture what can be an excruciating awkwardness associated with organised activities. The poem begins:

There is
One chance!

To swim
Before we get on the bus, you’ll
Regret not swimming, everyone likes to
Swim—

(I’d especially encourage you to read this poem on the page, where so much of its clever comedic effect takes place through its spacing, lineation and punctuation...)

In the poem ‘Brine’, ‘Every kid / Is a dark / Poet’. The poem describes a destination imagined, ahead of time, in terms of

... bodies
In estuaries
Near lazy police stations,
Mothers talking to the news
In the eighties.

But, the poem’s speaker concludes:

Really, the beach
Was gorgeous.
The TV was murder
And ads.

None of these poems comprise more than an A5 page, and while I'm reluctant to suggest a kind of uniformity, there is a sense here of a collection that's uniform much like a set of postcards, or ticket stubs, or another form of physical keepsakes might be: here we have the book's titular timestamps reimagined, made material, and given a linguistic presence that's tangible and often wonderfully strange.

Often, there is a conversational ease, and also a musical quality to the poems' lines, along with the voice of a friend sharing an anecdote or story—inviting the reader to step into the poems' spaces. Two of my particular favourites in this light, which happen to share a double-page spread, are the poems 'Brunny' and 'Meantime', which I'm hoping Sofie might read (one or both—though she might have her own reading set list!)

I am thrilled to help *Timestamps* make its way into the world. Congratulations to Sofie, and to the team at Five Islands Press. It is a pleasure to declare *Timestamps* launched.