

- The Weekend Australian 22 Sep 2012
- Review by Liam Davison

“Verse novel navigates zones of longing and belonging”

The Sunlit Zone

By Lisa Jacobson 5 Islands Press

FOR a diver, the sunlit zone is the life-affirming point of return from the murky depths of either the twilight zone or the zone of total darkness.

For Lisa Jacobson, it is also the metaphoric touchstone for her quietly compelling verse novel and provides the structural framework of the narrative that drives it. Only after one has plumbed the depths and stared into the abyss can one fully appreciate the dazzling riches of a place that teems with life, though not necessarily life as we know it.



The Sunlit Zone is full of surprises. Set in the near future with a narrative arc spanning 30-odd years from 2020 to the early 2050s, the story is by turns playfully ethereal and darkly disturbing, not least for the unsettling familiarity of the damaged world it presents as our possible future.

North is a youngish researcher at a marine laboratory in Melbourne. While familiar regional landmarks and a rich vernacular anchor the story to the known, it's the unknown and unexpected mutations of language, and of the natural world, that enthrall us.

The last apostle on the Ocean Road might have just carped it but Jacobson's ocean is stocked with unfamiliar feral interlopers and genetically modified replicas of endangered species. Carbon counters and water police monitor usage of scarce resources in a fraught but benignly Orwellian climate of fear that has morphed into passivity and blithe acceptance. In a world of designer embryos and nanotechnologies that position the hybrid or artificial as the new real, characters live in a state of emotional numbness where empathy towards another being is tempered by the knowledge that it is probably a clone.

While much of Jacobson's technological inventiveness is the usual Bradbury-ish furnishing of speculative sci-fi put to playfully poetic purpose, it becomes apparent that North's numbness is born of a deep grief and longing. Her trauma lies in her past, which must be revisited if she is to move forward. This is a tried and proven narrative device that holds the reader with a well-paced plot. But it's Jacobson's lyrical engagement with the Orphic tradition, as much as her narrative skills, that warrants comment.

North's backward glance in search of redemption relates to her first love, Jack, and to the loss of her twin sister Finn – a marvellous hybrid creation. Born with gills and a disturbing affinity for water, she undergoes a series of wondrous mutations before her inevitable departure for the underworld. Racked with self-recrimination, North's mourning for her sister leads to an emotional detachment that can only be resolved by the transformative journey to the sight of her pain.

As you would expect of a verse novel from an accomplished poet, Jacobson's story engages and carries the reader. The lasting appeal, though, comes from its mythic impetus and the elegiac quality of the verse itself.

The verse novel has a strong tradition in Australian poetry and it would be pleasing to think that this impressive contribution from an established Australian poet finds the readership that so often seems reserved for more conventional, though not necessarily more accessible, fiction.