



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

Gig Ryan's Launch of *Cocky's Joy* by Michael Farrell

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April Fools Day is interpreted by Christians to mean that day when Jesus is sent from Pontius Pilate to Herod and then back to Pilate – a terrible scenario that ends in tragedy as each authority wipes his hands of a decision. But April Fools Day – a day of pranks – goes further back in time, origin unknown. It's a day when one might be sent on a fool's errand – where one is required to perform an impossible or imaginary task – which is how an economist would view the writing of poetry.

In a review of Michael Farrell's *a raider's guide* for *Australian Book Review* seven years ago, I wrote, 'Farrell overtly and consciously pursues what's usually innate in poetry and remixes, samples and shuffles the works of others – "A bit of past reglued, retouched...Humans can't help adding levels, becoming replicas of what they enter" ("sumumn").' I also described that book as a sort of Pilgrim's Progress, as the narrator tries on for size, and is dented by, various types of poetry, and various procedures for writing poetry, and comes out alive, continually questioning the making of an aesthetic. Partly, it's this willed pursuit of an aesthetic that tilts Farrell's poems into humour. Humour works to deflect, to pre-empt, criticism. His last book *open sesame* perhaps more clearly embodied this necessarily open-ended quest, the code to opening the cave is tantalisingly withheld, or only the poet can say the magic words.

Many of the poems in this book are strings of narration obscurely linked by image or by humour, linked abruptly like cartoon frames. And as with most humour, there's an underlying seriousness or tragic absurdism, as in 'The Story of what's Inside The Heart':

When someone's going to kill you, love you, they like
to know what's inside you. I feel like that too and
don't even know you. I came out of the bush, I put
my hand in the wound in your side (wanting to know
what was there). It wasn't poetry. No 'story' either:
the story was inside the story...

Yet the topsy-turviness is also relayed as mundane, as apparently obvious in Farrellium, almost a recitation of creed: the absurdity is rendered as flatly regular, because the poet is in control, and this makes it even funnier, even more parodic, as the norm transforms into the surreal.

Some of the best poems here may even be true love poems, with an armour of scepticism unable to disguise the romantic, as in these lines from 'Making Love (To A Man)':

Talk only leads to more talk...
...We go into
each other, then back into ourselves, physical's only
part of it.

or these from 'The Clockroach' –

Losing a hand
in his hair, or his cool in an email, that's where the static went.

– which also reminds me of Pope's zeugma 'to lose her heart or necklace at a ball'.

His homages to normal life are also parodic – sometimes Michael's world seems like a transposed Under Milk Wood with assortments of amusing or fey men, and pugnacious women, of bumbling relatives, chattering friends, their ins and outs; yet the rendering of these vividly loose dolewave grindr app cliques is offset by an interiority, an O'Hara-like, or even Keatsian, yearning. Alone, among the shifting crowd, in some cerebral billabong of memories, mobilising a new nostalgia. Hence the title Cockey's Joy, which was what farmers called Golden Syrup or treacle. This perhaps also alludes to David Campbell, that ACT Monaro squatter who eulogised his landscape in 'Cockey's Calendar'. But most blatant of course is the obvious pun in Cockey's Joy, that subverts an innocently heterosexual masculinity, and instead locates a voracious gay sensibility as the worthy messenger of history – a sensibility best seen in his Forbes-inflected tour of men 'Spoiled For Choice: 80 Ganymedes'.

The instabilities of modern life, easing in and out of high and low art, of intoxication and sobriety, are hewn in gloriously imaginative vignettes, as in 'New I New Field' (a title that may allude to Robert Southwell's 'New Heaven New Warre'):

I learned points theory growing up in Venezuela...
...I sit at the lunch table, firing
weapons, ordering more soup, interviewing Pink.

These time-free juxtapositions mirror online culture where everything is available, but also compromisingly value-less, the only hierarchy of the internet being one of 'likes'.

Yet there's also quivering nostalgia for a period of comparative simplicity gathered over a billycan of tea. Farrell lampoons such nostalgia yet also digs at any who see it as only ridiculous, to measure their superiority by, or to ensure superiority exists. He takes a stockwhip to the tenets of a supposedly civilising education that might reify, if not erase, the naive artist, criticising those who ridicule and simplify ideas of existence in regions outside the populous cities, by alternatively conjuring nostalgia as equivalent to, as itself a theory. Michael doesn't so much celebrate rural life, as bring it with him, he recreates it in fact in the city, as bulwark against the fake sophistications that the city caters to.

These poems then also parody the processes of learning, the forelock-tugging necessity of quoting philosophers and theorists, yet they also revel in doing just that – 'Theories / probably don't know what a parsnip is' (from 'The Comic Image', which itself is a sort of theory, and critique, of poetry). He uses knowledge while scandalously parodying that gesture, as in his 'The Influence of Lorca in the Outback' written in a field report tone that resembles TV journos donning check shirts and jeans when interviewing the country cousins:

Even in the
cities it's known the Outback is no monoculture;
whispers have been heard of resistance, especially
by men who find Lorca too feminine. It's said that
here and there, the influence of Rimbaud is beginning
to show. That the Paris commune is referred to
as a local moment...

This is like Monty Python's Philosophers Football of Greeks v. Germans, as in the opening lines of 'Beautiful Mother':

You've always associated the two terms together
partly due to your reading of Schiller; partly due
to your watching of Kimba. Kimba sublimates
his mother in the water...

This poem then becomes a re-working of Jesus's autobiography:

...The Virgin Mary is prompted to
speak by the movement of the baby in her womb
She speaks Hebrew ... 'He
kicks like a bastard'. She defines a kind of
democracy...
...He builds a tower out of
beercans and critics say it's beautiful.

These poems kick all culture – Leonardo da Vinci, Metallica – into the present of mashed-up smashed-up daily life, and drag in icons of the Australian literary past such as Lawson. That is, they claim Australiana as not just dusty ornament, but as part of the blueprint of who we are, like the rooftop kangaroo on some early twentieth century gables that one sees in the inner suburbs – that replace the gargoyles of the traditionally wealthier suburbs. Interestingly the gargoyles were to ward off evil, while the kangaroo is seen as benign, so the perched kangaroo, used after Federation and more often after WW1, rejects European ideas of home as fortress to be protected, and instead is a welcoming sign proudly displaying its New World nationalism, a bit like that shown in those old tyres transformed into garden swans, so *Cocky's Joy* might also be seen as a sort of black tyre swan of trespass.

There are many self-referential comments on writing itself, on how it alters the writer, alters his perception of the world, that is, alters the world:

...Now that I've destroyed
what I've seen with description, I'll withdraw,
leaving a world, a rumour, a tarpaulin marked
with the bloody tracks of buffalo, who
even now huddle on the edges of the Universe,
to smoke and pray and jab Gatsby in the eye.
(‘The Great China Draggers’)

This is a high-fibre book – lots of cabbage and celery, as well as the intriguing ‘homemade anti-depressants’ in the first poem ‘Breakfast’. Poems emulsify their disorienting statements, non-sequiturs, and arguments into a fanciful, informed comeliness thwarting linear narration, branching out into ever more breathless scenarios, dripping with the treacle, or *Cocky's Joy*, of a

frantic imagination and always irreverent intellect that musters antecedents – such as the New York School he ‘went to’, as one poem puts it – into a giddyingly new adventure.

‘It’s coming out / quickly’, said the poem, but ‘it’ was not the poem.
(‘An Oral Poem’)

Gig Ryan has published six collections of poetry, including *Pure and Applied*, which won the 1999 Victorian Premier’s Prize for Poetry, and *Heroic Money*, which was shortlisted for the 2002 NSW Premier’s Prize for Poetry. In 2012 she was awarded the NSW Premier’s Literary Award for her *New and Selected* published by Giramondo. The recipient of writers’ fellowships and residencies from the Australia Council, she is a distinguished poetry critic, and poetry editor of the *Age* newspaper.