

ISSUE 233 | JUNE-JULY 2017 | ISSN 1039-7531

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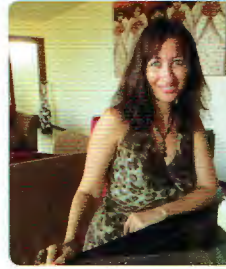
## JENNY VALENTISH



"I wanted to know if women self-medicated more than men. I wondered if a woman's social currency was still cheapened by her alcohol consumption in this day and age. I suspected that treatment options — including AA and NA — were falling short for women. I hypothesised that my own substance use might be

attributable to the internalised misogyny that flourished in me as a young woman, because of the association I had made between getting wasted and the freedom of men, being on the winning team."

## LEE KOFMAN



"The first time I read *The Master and Margarita*, I was 10 years old, still living in the Soviet Union and already an aspiring writer. Being a daughter of dissidents, I got to read the uncensored *samizdat* version. I was struck by the book in many ways, but the realness of magical events, like the famous flight of

Margarita over Moscow riding a broom, impressed me most in its sharp contrast to the dreary Soviet everyday."

## SEAN WILLIAMS



"The general principle is: never be afraid to ask questions. When someone asks you what you're working on, tell them, and tell them what you'd like to know. You might be amazed by what you learn. The week before I travelled to Antarctica I discovered in conversation that the peerless explorer Sir Hubert

Wilkins once lived in my very street. I don't think that'll make it into my novel, but you never know."

## ADELE WALSH



"There is a long-held belief that most, if not all, teens have access to devices. They don't. In fact, only 24 per cent of teens have access to a dedicated ereading device such as a Kindle or Kobo, though 90 per cent have access to mobile phones. Many teens find it necessary to visit their public library to have

access to computers and wifi that a lot of people take for granted. Some young people have little to no internet connectivity due to their geographic isolation."

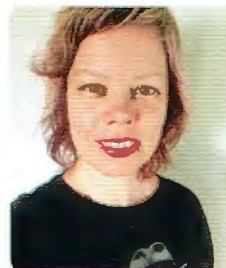
## MELISSA BRUCE



"My 'verse novel thingy' was destined by the Fates; I recently discovered I am distantly related to Shakespeare (William). I'd always held a secret passion for un-prose-like text, the pure rebellious joy of it, the space on the page to imagine. The affinity began with *The Cat in the Hat* and *Christopher Robin*. By age 10,

I had memorised *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes, '... And the highwayman came riding, riding, riding ...'"

## KIRSTEN KRAUTH



"A Rock & Roll Writers' Festival — which started in Brisbane (as many good things do: The Saints, Go-Betweens) and this year toured to Melbourne — is immediately enticing because it offers the chance to see musicians talking about music and memoir, lyricists talking about writing songs and journos talking about the bigger picture:

how to write music criticism in an age where everyone is a reviewer and how to manage histories of the music scene without offending those who were there ('I'm not in it!')."

## A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME?

### Melissa Bruce reframes the verse novel

**V**erse novels suffer from a bad name. But we need an urgent reframe. We live in the text-message-Snapchatting-Twitter generation. Writing looks different. We've almost come full circle with hieroglyphic emojis on tablets. There's scope to name a whole new category of original books that may simply look like verse novels.

This excerpt from an essay by Vikki Van Sickle, with her cute verse-style name, shows that since 2006, nothing much has changed:

*Many librarians, educators, and critics have attempted to define the genre but are frustrated by the narrow term 'verse novel' and the diversity of books that could conceivably fall under this category ... Clearly, familiar methods of categorisation and analysis are failing the verse novel. We need to expand our perceptions of what constitutes poetry, verse, and the novel, and look at the verse novel as an exciting form in the evolutionary literary process.*

You can probably already guess that I am an author-victim of that awful requirement (by marketing departments, bookstores, libraries and academics) to have my 'out of the box' book categorised. Yes, in this risk-averse, commerce-focused, heavily compartmentalised publishing market, I did a crazy thing, increasing the already significant degree of difficulty in getting a first book published, by writing a 'verse novel'. Or so it's called.

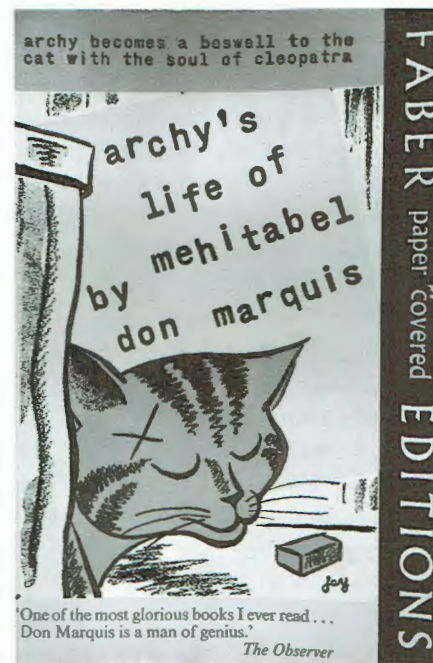
I didn't mean to. It was an accident. Destined by the Fates!



I know some of you already cringe with the concept of something annoyingly cryptic, egotistically pretentious, snobbishly elitist, rhythmically quirky, over-ambitious and non-user-friendly. But wait. Such prejudice! And I do not suffer alone ... Vikram Seth's bestselling verse novel *The Golden Gate* begins chapter five with:

*... An editor—at a plush party  
(Well-wined, provisioned, speechy, hearty).  
Hosted by (long live!) Thomas Cook  
Where my Tibetan travel book  
Was honoured—seized my arm: "Dear fellow,  
What's your next work?" "A novel ..."  
"Great! We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth—"  
"... In verse," I added. He turned yellow.  
"How marvelously quaint," he said,  
And subsequently cut me dead.*

Clearly Seth has written a verse novel. It even rhymes. But what about mine? At a brief glance, *Picnic at Mount Disappointment* might seem epically Homeric, but I would not aspire to call it 'poetry'. Let's leave that to the masters: Dorothy Porter, Les Murray, Anne Carsons, Coleridge, Ovid. Yet for want of a term, it's been labelled. Verse Novel. Libretto. Long Narrative Poem. Uniquely Formatted Text. I've searched for a nickname: Econometry (for want of a prettier word). Verse-atil-lit. A Hynov (hybrid novel). Or cutely ... an UFNov (unusually formatted). Help?



So what IS a so-called verse novel? Nothing new. Think Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (8th c. BC). Dante's epic narrative poems *Inferno* and *Divine Comedy* (14th c.). Chaucer's verse-prose *The Canterbury Tales* (15th c.) using iambic pentameter, also favoured by Shakespeare (16th–17th c.). Cervantes' hybrid style with *Don Quixote* (1612). Byron's *Don Juan* (1819) and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (c.1830). Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her friend when drafting *Aurora Leigh* (1856): 'Conversations & events, why may they not be given as rapidly & passionately & lucidly in verse as in prose—.' Think Clough's *Amours de voyage* (1858), Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), subtitled 'a novel in verse', though some critics debate both terms!

Australian authors have been leaders in the form with Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten*, *The Monkey's Mask* and *Wild Surmise*, Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* and *Fredy Neptune*, and Alan Wearne's *The Nightmarkets* and *The Lovemakers*.

Verse novels have been popular with young readers including works by US authors Sonya Sones and Nikki Grimes, and Australians Steven Herrick, Margaret Wild and Sally Murphy.

Defining the boundaries of what constitutes a verse novel is another thing altogether. In my extensive research on the subject, I found that the learned academics noted the *lack* of extensive research and agreed with the categorisation dilemma.

Elizabeth Claire Alberts (*Writing the Young Adult Verse Novel*) asked prolific Australian author, Steven Herrick, if he identified his publications as verse novels:

... I'm not sure if I care about these definitions too much. If a piece of writing conveys what the writer wants it to, then it works, no matter what it's labelled. I sometimes feel these definitions are created by fellow writers/critics who want to pigeonhole or belittle a genre ...

My 'verse novel thingy' was destined by the Fates: I recently discovered I am distantly related to Shakespeare (William). I'd always held a secret passion for un-prose-like text, the pure rebellious joy of it, the space on the page to imagine. The affinity began with *The Cat in the Hat* and *Christopher Robin*. By age 10, I had memorised *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes, '... And the highwayman came riding, riding, riding ...' My first favourite novel was *archy's life of mehitabel* by Don Marquis, narrated by a 'free verse' poet turned cockroach (in purgatory), who cannot reach the typewriter shift key.

a man thinks  
he amounts to a lot  
but to a mosquito  
a man is  
merely  
something to eat

I worked for years in theatre, touring with the Royal Shakespeare Company through the UK on the rhythms of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, and for the Victorian State Opera on a libretto from that marathon verse narrative, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I directed *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill for the Sydney Theatre Company, with its unusually formatted overlapping dialogue, and for the State Theatre Company of South Australia,

a poetic play called *The Swan* by Elizabeth Gloff.

I continued to gravitate towards books which danced around traditional prose, hybrid works like Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, or the delicate brevity of *The Diving-Bell & The Butterfly*, dictated by Bauby with the blink of one eye after his terrible accident left him paralysed. Also, Kate Grenville's gritty short story 'Blast Off' from her collection *Bearded Ladies*, and Marguerite Duras' *The Malady of Death*, described as 'an extended haiku on the meaning of love'.

One day, during my UTS Masters degree, I received *overwriting* feedback. Wounded, I wrote the next two stories with as few words as possible. 'You don't like my words? Take that!' But both stories were immediately published and I was gratefully humbled. I then ruthlessly *economised* the early draft chapters of my novel and suddenly the rest of the story *cantered* out easily in some kind of natural rhythm and found its organic form. So there I was. The Fates had me back at the beginning with a verse novel about a girl on a farm ... riding ... riding ... riding ...

In the distance you can see  
Mount Disappointment.  
Promising.

But what have I written? An UFNov? All I know is that it's something for the digital-information-overloaded-text-message-Twitter generation. It's a familiar speedy read with plentiful white space.

So where do we stand? How do we categorise the form of Kirsten Krauth's novel, *just\_a\_girl*, where the protagonist's voice is split into short text-message style sentences, or the current *New York Times* bestseller, *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, who has invented a new form that uses a collage of musings from historical and invented quotations? How do we define mobile app books like *Hooked* — fiction for the Snapchat Generation — and other

kinds of 'microlit' devised for digital devices by publishers like Spineless Wonders? Will we soon have interactive hologrammed words floating poetically in space? What will we call that?

What we need is a new name and an attitude change. Or does a rose smell just as sweet without a label?

#### FURTHER READING

Joy Alexander, 'The Verse-Novel: A New Genre', *Children's Literature in Education*, 36, 2005

Vikki Van Sickle, 'Subcategories Within the Emerging Genre of the Verse Novel', *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature*, 10.3, 2006

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Melissa Bruce is the author of the novel, *Picnic at Mount Disappointment*, and various short stories, poems and plays. She currently works as a writer, teacher and performance consultant at [melissabruce.com](http://melissabruce.com).