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Poetry d'amour: The love theme in contemporary Australian poetry

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Abstract

Most poetry is motivated by love, which has been the driving force behind many poets and historical events. Love has resulted in monuments, epics, and cenotaphs, and the best love poems are timeless monuments to the legendary worth of love. Australian literature has a rich history of love, with poets like Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, and Judith Wright presenting unique perspectives. Paterson's romanticized love, rooted in nature, often conveys nostalgia, while Lawson's harsh realities reflect Australian life hardships. Wright and Murray's 20th-century poetry focuses on introspective themes and personal relationships, connecting human emotions to the natural world. The present paper critiques Poetry d'Amour 2014: Love Poems, an anthology of love poems selected and edited by Liana Joy Christensen from Australian poets participating in 'Poetry d'Amour 2014' and entries in the 2014 'Poetry d'Amour' Love Poetry Competition. This review paper attempts to provide a critical insight into Australian poets' contemporary presentation of the love theme, focusing on the poems meticulously picked and presented in the anthology's eight thematic divisions.

Keywords: Love poetry, Australian poetry, love theme, poetry d'amour, love poems

Introduction

Love is a powerful force that transforms lives, brings joy, happiness, and fulfilment, and shapes our identity and purpose. It is crucial for emotional and psychological health, providing a sense of belonging, security, and support. Strong relationships lead to better mental and physical health, positive self-esteem, resilience, and happiness. Love is also the motivation behind most poetry, historical events, monuments, epics, and cenotaphs, as it is timeless and legendary. There have been many outstanding versifiers throughout history who have made significant contributions to the field of love poetry. Love poets have probed the depths of human emotion and relationships, inspiring readers with their heartfelt lines, from the classic works of Ovid, William Shakespeare, John Keats, and Robert Browning to the current writings of Maya Angelou and Lang Leav.

Love has been a prominent theme in Australian literature as well, with poets like Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, and Judith Wright presenting their unique perspectives and styles. Paterson's romanticised depiction of love, rooted in nature and the Australian bush, often conveys nostalgia and longing for a lost or unattainable love. This romanticised portrayal reflects the Victorian-era sentimentality that influenced Australian literature. Henry Lawson's love portrayal is rooted in the harsh realities of Australian life, reflecting the hardships faced by early settlers. His poem "The Drover's Wife" showcases enduring love and resilience in the Australian bush. In the 20th century, Judith Wright and Les Murray's poetry shifted the portrayal of love, focusing on introspective themes and personal relationships. Wright's "Woman to Man" explores the depth of love and human vulnerabilities. Les Murray's poem "The Broad Bean Sermon" explores love, growth, and decay through broad beans, connecting human emotions to the natural world and showcasing the interconnectedness of human emotions and the environment.

Australian love poetry is a rich and diverse genre that has been celebrated and anthologized. Two important anthologies of love poetry, *The Penguin Book of Australian Love Poems* and *Australian Love Poems 2013*, offer a nuanced and diverse portrayal of love in Australian poetry. "The Penguin Book of Australian Love Poems" is edited by Jennifer Strauss and features a comprehensive collection of love poems written by Australian poets from the 19th

century to contemporary times. It covers themes such as romantic love, longing, desire, and the complexities of human relationships.

On the other hand, "Australian Love Poems 2013" is edited by Mark Tredinnick and offers a more contemporary perspective on love poetry in Australia. It features a diverse range of poets from various generations and cultural backgrounds, influenced by contemporary Australian poetry. The anthologies share common threads in their exploration of love as a universal human experience, showcasing the depth and breadth of emotions associated with love, including joy, pain, longing, and intimacy. Both anthologies feature a rich tapestry of voices, offering diverse perspectives on love that weave together to form a cohesive portrayal of love in the Australian literary landscape.

The Penguin Book of Australian Love Poems by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann is an anthology that showcases the evolution of Australian poetry and its love treatments from colonial times to the present day. It focuses on traditional forms of poetry like sonnets and villanelles, reflecting their preference for structured and formal poetry. The anthology also includes explicit and sensual poems highlighting love and desire.

Liana Joy Christensen, the editor and curator of *Poetry d'Amour 2014*, has been instrumental in bringing together a diverse range of love poetry from established and emerging Australian poets. Her editing choices gave birth to the book, displaying a varied range of styles and views that embody the spirit of love in all its forms. *Poetry d'Amour 2014* is a contemporary and experimental love poetry collection featuring a diverse range of voices and styles, exploring themes of desire, sexuality, and identity and challenging traditional notions of love and romance. The anthology offers a nuanced and eclectic representation of love, encompassing a broader spectrum of emotions and experiences.

Poetry d'Amour 2014 has made a huge impact on the world of love poetry, providing a place for poets to share their thoughts and communicate on a personal level with readers. The anthology has brought together a diverse range of viewpoints, revealing the universal nature of love and its ability to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. It has aided the literary discussion of love poetry and served as an invaluable resource for researchers, educators, and students interested in studying and interpreting love poetry. One of the most noteworthy repercussions of this anthology is its ability to provoke emotions and stir the spirits of its readers. It celebrates the supreme power of love that significantly impacts society by promoting empathy, compassion, and altruism, leading to a more harmonious community. It inspires collaboration, cooperation, and common goals, bringing people together and bridging differences, fostering unity and mutual understanding.

Discussion

Poetry d'Amour 2014 is an anthology of love poems selected and edited by Liana Joy Christensen from work by invited poets from across different parts of Australia performing at 'Poetry d'Amour 2014', and from entries in the '2014 Poetry d'Amour Love Poetry Competition'. The editor has very meticulously chosen and arranged the poems in eight thematic sections, each illustrated by an apt and persuasive title bearing a quote from one of the poems included in the section. Back to back, these eight sections

show interconnectivity and continuance in poems recounting the timeless saga of the varied experience of love.

Section One, "The world offers a choice", as the caption states, contains poems that draw their metaphors and images from the vast landscape ranging from mountain to ocean and from the earth to its infinite horizons, displaying sundry hues of love. Section Two, "The city of love", largely as it refers to Paris devoted to lovers, recounts the unsung tales of human love with equal intensity and fervour found in any city across the world regardless of its name. The poems in Section Three, "Love... maybe?" articulate the convolutions, doubts, fears, and vacillations of lovers in an engaging way. Section Four, "Love notes", comprises poems rich in the sweet cadence of the spiritual unison of the two souls united by the eternal spirit of love. The poems in Section Five, "The crazy fingering thing", explore the physical dimension of love, which provides the lovers with a matrix for a realisation of their spiritual unity in bodily embrace.

In Section six, "The stricken heart", as the title implies, there are Poignant voices of heartache and compunction experienced by the lovers undergoing trials and tribulations of time. The poems in Section Seven, "This place spurns time", commemorate love's power to survive through all phases of time. And finally, Section Eight, "Ouroboros", adds some lighthearted poems with funny and playful aspects of love, contrasting with the serious and deeper passions in the preceding sections.

Thus, the present anthology comprises iridescent hues and shades of love expressed in a variety of forms and ways. The poems range from sheer carnal to deep emotional aspects of love, particularly in the socio-cultural backdrop of Australia. Each poem in this anthology has its own distinctive persona, outlook, and flavour, but for the sake of competition, some poems have been carefully selected for prizes and commendations.

Shane McCauley's first-prize-winning poem, "Early autumn at Bell's Rapids", depicts love's might for or in surviving on all "hardened grounds". The lover's words sustain hope in the beloved's heart:

You said: In spring I will
come here to remember you and the new life
you have flowered in my heart."
(p. 118)

The absence of the lover torments and agitates the beloved completely, but optimism and perseverance keep the cauldron of love burning within: "Long sleep lessens pain but not / desire."

Ross Jackson's second-prize-winning poem, "Darling, let's say", puts together the sweet-sour recollections of the days shared by the lovers, thereby underscoring the triumph of love's feeling over ageing in moving images:

Let's say you were dazzling
when like an idling taxi, smoking frost
I spotted you across Kings Park
your shoes springing diamonds from dewy grass.
You were scrambled eggs, perfect coffee.
You were cinnamon dusted let's say that.
...
Grey haired Darling, may we say that?
(p. 120)

Debi Hamilton's short prose poem, "Geography", has been highly commended. It's noteworthy for the depth of emotion expressed well within the economy of words:

up close your eyes are hot oh they are and tropical enough to
fold my petals back and back I am the heart of a flower
pressed flat against you

(p. 2)

"Kafeneion Eros", another highly commended poem by Rosie Barter, underscores a sense of empathy, which resuscitates the love relationship.

He searches my eyes
like a knife to an oyster shell
and when I do not open
he sighs
he shrugs
and brings a slice of sky
studded with pomegranate seeds
which he feeds to me
from a small silver fork
until my eyes are pearls
on his *komboloi*.

(p. 32)

[Here the word "*komboloi*" translates from Greek as 'worry beads'.]

The rural, regional, and remote WA award-winning poem "Who knows the names of the clouds?" by Maree Dawes marks the eternity of true love vis-à-vis the temporality of clouds and constellations: "I know we will not be unmade / until we have seen them / in the rising sun." (p. 4) Likewise, Gail Willems' "Stepping to me", winner of the Peel Region Award, carries an unforgettable line: "time crosses my palm with a touch of fear" (p. 62), projecting a longing to cede to love and win over time.

Danny Gunzburg's poem, "To Claire", has been commended. The prieve of a heart pining for love is perceptible in this poem: "If you couldn't look my way / my heart would surely sink . . ." (p. 66). The unreciprocated love has locked the lover-persona into a longing that is perpetuated by hope, firmness, and strength of mind: "Once again the hope in me would twirl . . ." (p. 66) In another commended poem, "After an argument", Heather Taylor Johnson affirms that love is not "subject to time", it makes sense even with smaller gestures having genuine feeling and concern: "I say: even nests / with holes make lovely homes." (p. 56). Surely the true feeling binds the lovers in an eternal bond.

Love has the ability to both constrict and broaden the horizons of being and becoming. Gunzburg's "Making love to Alex" beautifully expresses the lovers' delighted mood when they are together, echoing Donne's metaphysical conceit. In their embrace, they discover the entire world. Images drawn from different continents are used to illustrate the joyful experience of carnal union:

I was making love to Alex
. . .
She kissed me and I went to Canada,
and Rome, and Egypt, and Sudan.
I went on fire to Korea, and Japan, and Holland.
Her lips took me to Paris, and Malaysia,
and Babylon.

(p. 30)

Indeed, the physical dimension of love is crucial in romantic relationships, as it allows for emotional expression, deepening of connection, and spiritual unity. This intimate connection transcends the physical realm, fostering a deeper, more meaningful connection between partners. Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell's *The Five Love Languages* genuinely emphasises the significance of physical touch as a primary love language, transcending words and actions, and essential for emotional health and well-being in romantic relationships.

Amy Crutchfield's "Reunion sonnet" is a fourteen-line free sonnet with rhyme. It honours the triumph of the human heart over the all-powerful forces of time. The lovers reunited in their old age after a period of separation, find the light of love blazing as before in their eyes without a flicker: "We raise our glasses and I glimpse the truth / Your eyes still harbour my long exiled youth." (p. 70). The past they shared is their "mutual treasure" that they have cherished for a long time. The two lovers' reunion reignites the fire that had been smouldering in their hearts for each other. As the poet puts it, their separation is a tough fire-test of love:

So time and fire have refined our young hearts,
Where there was difference we now find none.

(p. 70)

This poem delves into the romantic concept of ageing with a long-term companion, concentrating on the importance of their connection in old age. The love story of Noah and Allie from Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook* is a well-known illustration of this notion, demonstrating the strengthening attachment and the impact it has on individuals and their loved ones in old age. Long-term companionship in elderly couples can significantly improve their physical and emotional well-being, according to research (Bookwala, 2005). Couples who have been together for a long time have a higher sense of happiness and well-being. This support can also serve as a source of wisdom and inspiration for younger generations, demonstrating that love can grow stronger and deeper over time.

Love has the power to transcend all socio-cultural backgrounds, races, creeds, ages, genders, castes, communities, and regions. It gives the lovers the confidence to accept and meet every obstacle that comes their way. It is never willing to admit defeat in any situation. Glen Phillips captures this trait in his poem "Tuo Straniero," in which two strangers converge on a point and hug one another for a lifetime, despite differences in "culture, age, gender, or temperament":

. . . So we are all strangers, even
who are closest in a life embrace.
And shouldn't it be so? Love is
a reaching out so there must be always
a gulf or chasm to joyfully leap across.

(p. 122)

And that's what Jan Rebgetz sings in her song "The summer you missed me": "something happened / to both of us while I was away / and now . . . / your smile is mine." (p. 28). As Pablo Neruda, a Chilean poet and Nobel laureate, emphasises in his poem "One Hundred Love Sonnets" the universality and timelessness of love, implying that it extends beyond the individual and the present moment: "I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in

this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you."

Rashida Murphy's poetry "Maybe" recalls the lovers' felt-experience of joy and anguish of meeting and departing, waiting and trusting, reminiscing and hoping, and promising and keeping the word:

I held my breath when we met...
 You listened to me
 You looked at the shards of my life...
 I dreamed of cool forests where I could lie down beside you
 among the honeysuckle.
 Eat cherries. Wear scarlet. Wait for the ease you promised...
 Wait for the future.
 Wait for our lives.
 Wait for tingling, nerve endings, senses, faith, poetry, love.
 (p. 36)

Murphy's persona exemplifies how love is preserved by the lovers' endurance and mutual trust.

Love happens intuitively, unexpectedly, and without warning. When two souls fall in love, there is no place for pretensions, and no tangible thing is required to prove it; nor is a special day required to convey one's heartfelt feelings, as Mark Tredinnick states in "Poem written too late for Valentine's Day; or, why I didn't send flowers":

What rose will I give you, my love, when every rose you
 love
 Grows in your garden bed already? How will I even
 begin,
 When love has us all surrounded . . .
 (p. 3)

Indeed, love poetry is an instinctual act originating from the human soul, allowing individuals to express their deepest emotions of love and longing through the written word, often capturing indescribable feelings. The remark by Liana Joy Christensen that "writing love poetry is as instinctual as birdsong" is acceptable, but it is not the plain chirrup; poems that appeal to the heart are well-wrought and purposefully refined with the use of poetic devices such as metaphor, simile, irony, and paradox, among others, in addition to concrete imagery, illustration, and structure. The current collection is notable for its content and craft, as well as its wide range of experiences. Each of these poems has a distinct texture that appeals to an understanding heart. This book is exceptional for its blend of poetry and love that complement one another, as Louise Carter emphasises in the anthology's final five-line poem, "Ouroboros":

Poetry requires madness
 like anything worthwhile. And poetry
 is love when times are tough,
 while poetry in times of love
 is madness.
 (p.136)

The connection to a mythological beast called 'Ouroboros' in the title of the last poem represents the permanence of love. It carries the image of a snake devouring its own tail in Greek and Egyptian stories, combining the symbolism of the circle and the serpent, indicating wholeness as well as immortality and the circle of existence. The editor gets

credit for placing this poem deliberately near the end of the current anthology, so setting the tone for more and more of such interesting collections in the years to come, as the experience of love is endless and the poets' voices are never-ending.

In actual fact, writing love poetry is both instinctual and intentional, and it reflects the complexity of human emotions, encompassing experiences of longing, heartbreak, and the various emotions associated with love, creating a diverse and intriguing body of work. For instance, Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Love Song" highlights the boundless capacity of the heart to hold love, a universal truth that poets and the human experience cannot measure: "Nobody has ever measured, even poets, how much a heart can hold."

Conclusion

Poetry d'Amour 2014 is a notable anthology of Australian love poetry that celebrates the universal theme of love by bringing together a varied variety of voices and styles, expanding the literary debate surrounding this timeless subject. *Poetry d'Amour* 2014 is a must-read collection, particularly for the authenticity of love experience in the face of contemporary tug-of-war situations between the sexes, including sexist biases or feminist debates, sexual politicking, misogynist or misandrist tendencies, and other gender issues in a man-woman relationship. These poems represent the power of love in overcoming all obstacles and ruling out all differences, calming all oppositions and crises, combating all incursions of time and triumphing over narrowness of mind, and exerting an infinite positive and benefic influence on the world's negative and destructive forces. Adversity or the dictates of time cannot obliterate true love a bit, as E. M. Forster puts it in *A Room with a View*: "You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you. I know by experience that the poets are right: love is eternal." It is unequivocally supported by the poems in this collection.

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