

Wild Honey: Reading New Zealand Women's Poetry

By Paula Green. Massey University Press, Auckland, 2019.

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Reviewed by Jasmine Gallagher

Wild Honey is an expansive anthology which covers the last 150 years of women's poetry in New Zealand. Paula Green is widely known as an advocate of poetry and a generous and inclusive builder of community, as seen in her online blog NZ Poetry Shelf. This book continues her crusade to celebrate poetry in a way that is both accessible and welcoming. In *Wild Honey* Green has built a home for women's poetry, a metaphor that she emphasizes in the structure of the book. The book is structured in the form of a house with different parts of the house providing the basis for each chapter.

At the start of the book Green lays "The Foundation Stones", consisting of a section on three European settlers: Jessie Mackay, Blanche Baughan and Eileen Duggan. Following these foundations come the rooms of the house, such as "The kitchen" and "The nursery". These rooms reflect Green's desire to embrace, rather than reject, the domestic sphere in poetry. This embrace is significant, because as Green highlights in her introduction, "women have been criticized for adopting lightweight language and unworthy subject matter, in particular anything related to the domestic sphere; for getting too personal and for exposing excess feeling" (12). However, she does not limit the book to these more traditional rooms of female gendered activity. For example, she branches out into "The music room" (where lyricists such as Aldous Harding are discussed) and "The shoe closet", where the ability of a poet to imagine and articulate what it would be like to live life in someone else's shoes is located. Further sections leave the house and enter "The garden", "The hammock", "The countryside" and "The city". These outside areas allow an assessment of work that does not fit into the house so neatly. And one of my favourite poets, Alison Glenny, is discussed in the final section, "The sky", which allows an engagement with her collection *The Farewell Tourist*, an innovative meditation on species extinction and the fate of Antarctica in an era of climate change.

In the introduction, Green clearly explains that this book corrects the way women poets in New Zealand have been ignored, excluded and misread. However, she does not dwell on these negative experiences, and accordingly the book "is neither a formal history nor a theoretical overview of New Zealand women's poetry, but is instead a celebration and engagement with poems through my readings" (11). As a poet herself, Green shows her ear for the nuances of sound and rhythm in her readings. She also acknowledges that there are omissions in her book, due to the structure she has adopted. This structure means that poetic themes such as science, conflict, and ecology receive little attention compared to themes like food and childcare, which more easily fit into the house she has built. Similarly, Green notes that although we are nearing gender equality in New Zealand's poetry world, underrepresentation with regards to non-Pākehā ethnicities is still an issue. So, I want to focus a bit more on the domestic structure and celebratory tone of the book, and how *Wild Honey* reinforces or questions certain ideas we have about women's poetry in New Zealand.

In titling her first section "The Foundation Stones", Green unfortunately sends a signal that the house she has built is founded on a colonial view of the nation, a view that sees Europeans as 'discovering' some kind of *terra nullius*. I think this is a shame, because I certainly do

not think this was Green's intention, as she shows an awareness of colonialism in the chapter 'The airing cupboard', which discusses political poetry that engages with racism and postcolonial theory. Green elsewhere emphasizes her respectfully "cautious" approach when "writing about the poetry of Māori and Pasifika women" (229). However, despite this effort to address racism and colonialism, the book feels somewhat outdated at a time when so much work has been done—not only by intersectional feminists here in New Zealand but also literary critics overseas—to question gender binaries and highlight the links between nation-building, colonialism, and the systematic oppression of women's voices. And despite the upsurge in work addressing gender fluidity over the last decade, Green is largely silent on this topic.

I thought the section titled 'The love nest' might have been an opportunity to delve a bit deeper into the nature of sexuality, or to touch on Keri Hulme's rejection of gender binaries via her self-professed neuterhood. However, Green's failure to address the complexity of gender and sexuality partially reflects the fact that we are still somewhat behind the times here in New Zealand. For example, essa may ranapiri's explicit engagement with the western gender binary and Māori takatāpui in their landmark collection *ransack* was published the same year as *Wild Honey*.

While there is scant discussion of inequalities experienced by the LGBTQI+ community (even the section on identity titled 'The mirror' fails to properly engage with gender fluidity), I thought that the section 'The sickbed' enabled an effective engagement with the numerous ways that illness and associated disability permeate the writing of poetry. For example, with regards to Meg Campbell's archives Green notes that there was "a sense that Campbell felt like a poetry outsider, writing and publishing on the fringe of the mainstream or universities, outside anthologies and without encouragement and support" (314-15). So, Green's inclusion of "The sickbed" as an innovative 'room' in her house is one of its strengths.

Both the tone and structure of *Wild Honey* can be seen to wrangle with the many double binds women face today. For example, Green's celebratory tone is reminiscent of how women are still expected to be pleasing to others, not only in their appearance, but also their behaviour. This means being raised to 'smile and say thank-you' rather than critique – especially regarding our more negative emotions or experiences. So, I was glad that Green included at least a little bit of her experiences of being criticised for writing domestic poetry at the start of "The kitchen", where she also touches on repressive aspects of the female experience by noting how feminists in the 1970s worked to "break apart the oppressive female role model . . . refused to accept that 'woman' ought to be passive, obedient, spoke and written on behalf of, [or] confined by inherited gender roles" (162). And, while Green is not interested in explicitly theorising the poetry in *Wild Honey*, she has been very diplomatic in her approach to who she has included in the book. For example, more difficult, experimental and theoretical work, by poets such as Lisa Samuels and Michele Leggott, is included. And in the section "The hammock", where Green allows herself a bit of room to pick out some her favourites, she describes Therese Lloyd's *The Facts* as a form of "innovative literary criticism" (397). But her descriptive, rather than theoretical analysis means that she does not really have room to discuss their function as poetic texts.

Like its celebratory tone, the book's structure, built around the domestic arena of the home, ultimately reinforces gender stereotypes as much as it questions them. This is because the topics that do not fit so easily within the domestic house structure are not covered as thoroughly as those that do. And while this is noted by the author, I feel her justification for this structure both ignores how far we have to go and fails to see how getting there involves a more intersectional feminist approach. For example, Green highlights her belief that "Nowadays, women have the nerve and the shifting templates to write however they choose, finding eclectic writing points, within both a lived and an imagined world" (163). However, glaring facts such as the gender pay gap and inequalities she cites to do with ethnicity reveal that we still have a long way to go with gender related equality in New Zealand.

Women may be free to write how they like these days, but the demands of the market mean it is increasingly difficult to publish more challenging, theoretical and critical work in this country. Our small population affects our ability to write critically about each other's work. No one wants to offend someone that they will most likely will be working with at some stage during their career. This conflict of interest is inescapable here, but responding in a critical, as well as congratulatory, way to our literature, is important because it allows it to grow in a way that will never happen if are not honest in expressing our opinions. Criticality should be embraced as generous, in the same way as celebratory writing about writing is, especially as being critical arguably requires more bravery on the part of the writer. Accordingly, the celebratory tone of *Wild Honey* and the claim that the book is free of theory cause alarm bells to ring for me. This is because essentialism (especially with regards to gender), realism, pragmatism, and nationalism are theories that can be seen to silently permeate the book, despite the author's claim not to have employed theory in its writing.

In 1984 Roger Horrocks wrote an essay titled "No Theory Permitted On These Premises" where he outlines the way cultural nationalism in this country was anti-intellectual due to the promotion of pragmatism and realism over any other cultural theories. He articulated how this cultural nationalist era was "robustly masculine" in its emphasis on being supposedly free from theory, with prominent critic of the time A.R.D. Fairburn warning that "homosexuals and feminists were corrupting art in various ways such as making it 'over-intellectualised'." This cultural nationalist era (1930s-50s) of New Zealand history is noted by Green as the time when women started fading from view in our anthologies. So, it is ironic that Green adopts a similar, supposedly non-theoretical approach in the execution of *Wild Honey*. Additionally, the lack of any thematic entries in the index, let alone theoretical ones, make the book somewhat difficult to navigate as an encyclopedic resource, especially as the rooms of the house are not mutually exclusive in the topics they address. This is a shame considering the depth of research and scope of the book.

In an era where we are facing down extremely urgent issues such as climate change, a lack of affordable housing or job security, the cutting of our humanities departments at universities, and a global conservative backlash in the face of these issues (as seen in the election of a blatant sexist such as Donald Trump, not to mention Boris Johnson, and events like Brexit and the recent Christchurch terror attacks) we must have room to critically reflect on the way we write in New Zealand. And accordingly, we must continue to point out each other's sometimes invisible theories and privileges and how they colour our love for and view of the world of poetry. Paula Green has given the poetry canon in New Zealand a nudge, but *Wild Honey* has not reached its potential.