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Dorothy Porter’s poetics affirm the extremities of my corporal existence. I cannot escape my body but I can read Porter’s lyrics and become intimate with the pulsations, aches and fluids of my own mortality. Lines from the title poem in Porter’s poetry collection, *Crete* (1996), allow me to express my feelings towards her poetry: ‘Finding a vein / I find you… O flash! O honey!’

When discussing her verse novels, Dorothy Porter explicitly stated that she loved to ‘write bad’. It was Porter’s fearless exploration of the ‘bad’, the erotic taboo, that allowed her to take charge of the verse novel, and by doing so, create a space for discussion about poetry and queer sexuality.

In a paper presented at the Tasmanian Readers’ and Writers’ Festival in August of 1999, Porter spoke openly about an era in her life where – in an attempt to gain a wider readership and more
financial stability from her writing – she wrote the two young adult novels *Rookwood* (1991) and *The Witch Number* (1993). As Porter explains, despite her attempts to consciously write for a young adult audience, *The Witch Number* was still criticised for being too subversive. Porter believes that this rejection of *The Witch Number* was due to her exploration of witchcraft and menstruation and she was happy for this view to be proved wrong. However it was this rejection of *The Witch Number* that drove Porter to write against everything she considered ‘good’, to only write for herself – and what Porter wanted to write was poetry that would drip and make sticky freshly mopped tiles:

‘I wanted ingredients that stank to high heaven of badness. I wanted graphic sex. I wanted explicit perversion. I wanted putrid language. I wanted stenching murder. I wanted to pour out my heart. I wanted to take the piss. I wanted lesbians who weren’t nice to other women. I wanted glamorous nasty men who even lesbians want to fuck. I wanted to say that far too much Australian poetry is a dramatic cure for insomnia. But I still wanted to write the book in poetry.’

The ‘book’ that Porter is referring to is the award winning, best selling *The Monkey’s Mask* written in 1994, two years after the publication of her first verse novel *Akhenaten* in 1992. Before her death in 2008, Porter had written numerous poetry collections, libretti, and three more verse novels: *What a Piece of Work* (1999), *Wild Surmise* (2002) and *El Dorado* (2007). In all of these verse novels, Porter mounts a poetic examination and celebration of taboo bodily functions and desires and as such, creates a narrative for non-heteronormative sexuality.

The verse novel or verse narrative, though still a relatively new term, originates from one of the oldest traditions of writing – the epic poem. For the sake of definition, a verse novel is a narrative told through poetry. Although many contemporary verse novels, like Porter’s, are composed in various forms of free verse, the narrative may also be expressed in more traditional metres and stanzas, such as the Onegin stanzas in Vikran Seth’s *The Golden Gate* (1986). There is no restriction placed on the form or the content of a verse novel, the most basic foundation of this genre is that a linear or non-linear narrative is expressed through poetic verse.

Porter’s use of the verse novel has allowed her to self-reflexively employ a marginalised form of writing – poetry – to provide a narrative and voice for her marginalised protagonists. Throughout all of her five verse novels each of Porter’s protagonists experience non-heteronormative sexual desires – the incestual yearnings in *Akhenaten* and *What a Piece of Work*, the lesbian relationships in *The Monkey’s Mask*, *Wild Surmise* and *El Dorado* – and Porter presents a poetic exploration of these yearnings by injecting her lyrics full of abject erotic imagery – open and bleeding bodies intimately connected.

Just as all of Porter’s verse novels explore the erotic taboo, they are also a play on popular genre. Porter’s experimentation with genre hybridity is most notably seen within her noir detective verse novels, *The Monkey’s Mask* and *El Dorado*. Both verse novels express a form of unconventional narrative, and provide a supportive foundation for Porter’s use of queer erotic imagery. Porter’s detective protagonists, private investigator, Jill Fitzpatrick (*The Monkey’s Mask*) and Detective Inspector Bill Buchanan (*El Dorado*) are both unsuspecting readers of poetry, yet it is their deconstruction of poetry that provides an alternative resolution, both to their criminal investigations and their non-heteronormative sexual desires. *The Monkey’s Mask* contains one of Porter’s most quoted poems:

‘Sex and poetry’

I never knew poetry

was about
opening your legs
one minute

opening your grave
the next

I never knew poetry
could be
as sticky as sex.

This poem is an embodiment of Porter’s views on writing bad and exemplifies her blending of poetry and the erotic taboo. It is this technique, along with Porter’s use of genre hybridity that allows Porter’s poetic experimentations to destabilise conventional limitations of poetry and to create an alternative platform for queer sexuality and the gender narrative in Australian literature.

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