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A anyone who has lived in Sydney’s inner west will recognise the terrain of _Springtime_: gardens red-olent of mystery and decay, shabbiness, unexpected vistas, and streets that Michelle de Kretser describes as running ‘everywhere like something spilled’.

Frances has moved to Sydney with Charlie, who has left his wife and son Luke behind in Melbourne. Luke’s occasional visits fuel Frances’s uncertainty with intimations of a shared family history from which she feels excluded. She walks Rod, the timid dog she rescued from the pound, and muses on the vagaries of her situation, her fears and failings.

Frances is writing a book about objects in eighteenth-century paintings. Her descriptions of walks through Marrickville, and the secret gardens that back onto the Cooks River path, border on the baroque: ‘Flowers yawned, bronze-leaved cannas, lilies border on the baroque: ‘Flowers that back onto the Cooks River path, marrickville, and the secret gardens ings. her descriptions of walks through objects in eighteenth-century paint-

Springtime: A GhoST Story 
by Michelle de Kretser
Allen & Unwin
$14.99 hb, 92 pp, 9781760111212

The authors of the stories in _Breaking Beauty_ are graduates of the University of Adelaide, which Brian Castro (a professor there) reminds us in his introduction is ‘the first and best creative writing college in the country’. However, as an advertisement for creative writing at Adelaide University, this collection has limited success. While the contributors’ biographical notes are impressive – most have published a book, and there are winners of major national awards – the quality of the stories is uneven. J.M. Coetzee’s testimonial points to this with his focus on ‘the best of the writers in this collection [who] take us outside our comfortable selves’. Indeed, some of the best – like Stefan Lasiczuk’s ‘The Window Winder’ with its image of decapitated heads kissing, Sean Williams’s ‘The Beholders’ as a clever Twilight Zone-esque tale of aesthetics, and Katherine Arguile’s beautiful ‘Wabi Sabi’ with its magical realist components – are masterful explorations of the uncanny.

Humorous rather than realist stories are the most memorable: Rebekah Clarkson’s ‘A Simple Matter of Aesthetics’, with its finial-hating protagonist, Matthew Gabriel’s ‘To My Son’, which opens, ‘It is not your fault that you are ugly…’, and Rachael Mead’s paramedical ‘Pissing Blood for Lucy Liu’ are the witty high points. However, while most stories have potential, many authors try to self-consciously squeeze ‘beauty’ into their stories, and this compromises their work. An anthology with no theme would have been preferable. However, Lynette Washington has done a commendable job reining in the stories so that they are all succinct narratives. Perhaps the reader should heed Castro’s request not to ‘look at names invidiously but sample the way these works accrue in an interior dialogue’. With this in mind, I am relieved that this dialogue is not pretentious, nor does it strive to be avant-garde, like some of the work that comes out of the academy. For these reasons, _Breaking Beauty_ is a good book with some excellent stories.

Francesca Sasnaitis
Cassandra Atherton

Breaking Beauty 
edited by Lynette Washington
MidnightSun Publishing
$24.99 pb, 228 pp, 9781925227000

C row Mellow, the sixth novel by Julian Davies, centres on a bush retreat where a millionaire couple gathers artists to share around ideas. From an optimistic standpoint, the retreat is a salon. Viewed differently, all parties are engaged in a status grab: artists ‘came from the cities of the east coast to score … the kudos of being there when their colleagues weren’t’. For the millionaires, collect-

C row Mellow 
by Julian Davies
Finlay Lloyd Publishers
$28 pb, 384 pp, 9780987592941

ing artists has its own benefits.

This is an illustrated novel, with drawings on every page by Phil Day, who contributes dense and lively art, alternately fluid and scratchy. Sometimes he illustrates the plot; other times he extends and shadows it. This is only the first of the book’s conceits. It is an update of Aldous Huxley’s _Crome Yellow_ (1921). The plot centres on Phil Day – a young writer mysteriously named after the illustrator of this book – and Anna, daughter of the aforementioned millionaires. Phil, vying for Anna’s affections, is pitted against suitors with varying artistic philosophies. In his introduction, Davies calls his book a ‘novel of ideas’; these ideas are strongest when linked closely with the plotline. For instance, Phil observes that Anna might be limited by her wealth. Being “defined by money and her relationship to others” has the advantage of automatic self-definition, but definition itself can be a stricture.

From such observations, a macro-argument becomes evident: the book is about the tensions between art and commerce, with a climactic plot point centred on a choice that binds these cultures. Both wealth and art can be transformative; what is less sure is the willingness of humans to be transformed.

Ultimately, _Crow Mellow_ is a grab bag of ideas, often interesting, sometimes very successful. It can be uneven, but we need more books like it – ambitious, unruly, and utterly strange.

Ronnie Scott