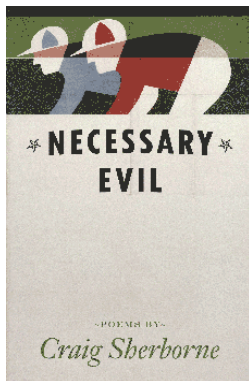


David McCooney reviews Craig Sherborne



Necessary Evil by Craig Sherborne
Black Inc., 2006

As illustrated by his extraordinary memoir, *Hoi Polloi* (2005), Craig Sherborne has many strengths as a writer. He has immense tonal control (and can range from the tragic to the farcical in a breath); he has an extraordinary ear for the language and hypocrisy of class; he is one of our great contemporary satirists; and he has a genius for the telling anecdote and detail. In short, Sherborne is a stylist. It is all the more remarkable that Sherborne is a stylist across so many different modes. As well as his brilliant memoir, Sherborne has written prose- and verse-drama, lyric poetry, and journalism. (In addition to being a writer of some superb arts journalism, Sherborne is a senior writer for Melbourne's *Herald Sun*).

As well as its stylistic brilliance, *Hoi Polloi* was notable for its searing quality, its almost clinical ability to portray the painful comedy of life. Sherborne's portrait of his parents (two antipodean grotesques) is especially memorable. In many ways the parents, and their milieu - a mix of provincial bourgeois New Zealand, middle-class Sydney and the horse racing world - are at the centre of Sherborne's attention. They also receive a deal of Sherborne's attention in many of the poems in the first half of *Necessary Evil*.

As well as being compelling portraits in themselves, these poems compare interestingly with *Hoi Polloi*. Sherborne's command of whatever mode he is writing in is immediately evident in the opening poem of *Necessary Evil*, 'A Racing Life'. The interaction between bookies and the poet's father is presented by using effects that are peculiarly poetic. The bookmakers

flashed the badge of their stomachs
at my father, fist on hips, parting
the curtain of their suit-coats.
He flashed his stomach back,
took off his porkpie hat to lick
his thumb across its feather.

This description is characteristic of Sherborne, illustrating through the defamiliarizing form of poetry the difference between insiders and outsiders, and using detail to show the strangeness of other people's lives. In addition, the subtleties of the half rhyme (father/feather; curtain/suit; back/lick) illustrate Sherborne's considerable prosodic skill.

In the poems concerning the poet's parents, we repeatedly see detail as superabundant with meaning: the mother's performance with her hair before going to bed; the poet helping his mother get dressed before going to the races. Such moments are vignettes that show the intensity of observation as a kind of poetry in itself. For instance, in 'Race Day':

I help my mother into her bosom,
zip her spine till
the freckled cleft is in position
and the dress is a drum between her shoulder blades.

Such intensity is seen not just in how Sherborne presents his vignettes, but also in the kind of vignettes that he relates, such as his practicing as a child to be a pickpocket in 'Suburban Confidential'. In this poem the child's desire to pry unnoticed is akin to the older poet's act of writing poetry that lays bare not only the mother's "purses with crossed fingers", but also the private things found in the parents' drawers underneath handkerchiefs and socks: "a book of sex acts called *Danish Passions*, / an open pack of condoms". The link between observation and sexuality is seen most overtly in 'Brett's Mum', a poem that relates an incident that is also related in *Hoi Polloi*. The poetic version of the story is much briefer and more intense.

Ultimately, the portraits of the author's parents end in loss and death. In 'Plastic Flowers' and 'The Live-Long Day' the decline in the daily life of the parents is shown through typically telling detail: "Ham sandwiches again for their dinner"; "they sit around the TV's flickering fire / like hobos of their own home". The climax of these poems is the book's most powerful individual poem, 'Ash Saturday', an elegy for the poet's father. In this poem, the poet looks unflinchingly (but not unfeelingly) at his father's ashes, "the same salt'n'pepper as his shaven stubble / that whiskered the sink-white from his razor".

The remaining poems of *Necessary Evil* concern the poet's professional life (especially two excellent and acerbic poems entitled 'Journo'), and experiences that could be described as anti-pastoral'. Sherborne's collection is clearly demarcated by a division between the metropolitan and the pastoral realms. This division is evident in 'The Poets' and 'Homesickness', two poems in which poetry is thematized as the mode that allows the poet to turn his attention from the prosaic things of the metropolis to the lyrical things of the countryside.

However, despite the linking in these poems of a poetic sensibility and the pastoral mode, there is nothing idyllic about the pastoral turn in *Necessary Evil*. Such a condition is notable in much recent Australian poetry, such as that by John Kinsella, Philip Hodgins, Coral Hull and Brendan Ryan, in which the pastoral mode is turned against itself, so as to illuminate the violence, loss and degradation associated with country life.

As in his other poems, however, Sherborne does not belong to a group. His anti-pastoral poetry is as original as his metropolitan work. Such originality is evident in the anti-pastoral poems that are deeply inflected with an apparently personal sense of pain and crisis, such as 'Ice House' and 'Flirting'. Elsewhere, poems such as 'Strapper' and 'Plague Proportions' show a more distanced and enigmatic attention to the features of country life. In these poems, Sherborne's style is something akin to that of Les Murray's: intense, riddling, and eccentric. For example, 'Harvest Ritual of the Seven Houses' begins:

Dusk, the morning of the night,
when the moon is sun to all houses
and our homes, these birds
made of wood and steel,
have hinges chirp the wind for a little welcome.

Or else, there are Murravian, epigrammatic moments such as this: “Poor’s when the rain’s your entertainment”.

The shift from the metropolitan to the pastoral, from the plenitude (however satirized) of the urban middle class to the sparsity of the desert that “gives no meal / except the sun’s poured wind” is an unexpected and powerful one. It shows that Sherborne’s poetry has considerable range and that he, as a poet, cannot be easily pigeon-holed (as ‘Larkinesque’, for instance).

Necessary Evil is an immensely powerful work. It ends on a note of seriousness that may surprise admirers of Sherborne-the-satirist. It is a work that seeks meanings in both the everyday and the unusual. It also views other people with an intensity that could be described as anatomical, but the self comes under a similar scrutiny. In the end, this is a work that shows poetry to be a kind of special knowledge, perhaps a kind of consolation for the difficulties of living and dying. The poetry of *Necessary Evil* is not interested in fashions or being fashionable. Rather, in its unique combination of directness and obliquity, it is urgent, powerful and utterly necessary.

David McCooey’s first collection of poems, [Blister Pack](#) (Salt), was awarded the Mary Gilmore Award in 2006. He is a senior lecturer at Deakin University (Geelong).