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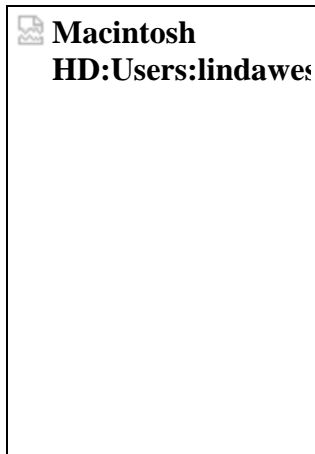
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TEXT review

Behind the eyes: Poetry of witness

review by Autumn Royal



Susie Utting

Flame in the Fire

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide 2012

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Flame in the Fire poetically explores issues of an intense and unsettling nature. In this debut collection, Susie Utting offers the reader her ‘poetry of witness’ from her time spent as a volunteer in 2006 at an orphanage in Zimbabwe for children affected by HIV/AIDS. Through a series of autobiographical poems, Utting expresses an elegiac observation of social and political injustices, revealing the nuanced ways in which these experiences have altered the perceptions and understandings of her own personal grief. Utting offers this contextual information in the collection’s foreword, providing a frame through which to read the poems. In her own words, Utting explains:

The poems portray my residual trauma of the Zimbabwean experience; how when I returned home I could not reconcile my life in Australia with or to what I had so recently witnessed. I reassessed painful personal experiences with a new perspective and then revisited my representation of the Zimbabwean situation to ensure that people and places were portrayed in the most authentic way possible. (7)

Thus, for Utting, there is much more at stake than the aesthetic qualities of her poetry. Utting's intention is for *Flame in the Fire* to offer a poetic documentation to promote social awareness of the difficulties she witnessed in Zimbabwe.

According to Carolyn Forché, a poet and the anthologist of *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), a fundamental significance of witness poetry is that it may provide 'evidence of what occurred' (Forché 1993: 30). Whereas Forché's description of witness poetry focuses on the personal rather than the political, Utting's focus is on the personal as a political statement. *Flame in the Fire* is both Utting's testimony and a testament to the children she helped to support.

Flame in the Fire opens with the poem 'Self-reflection in Mwenezi River'. It is one of the collection's most outstanding poems and in this lyrical encounter, Utting explores the role of memory and ethics implicit in her observational position. The sparse lines mirror the sharpness of such introspection, and emphasis is placed on the act of looking as well as the point of view from the lyrical 'I'. The opening stanzas read:

I see the bucket crashing
down the well

where the snake slid
over the rim into the chill
dark water. (11)

With these lines Utting explicitly positions herself as a visitor in an unknown environment, expressing regret for not encountering it sooner: 'You didn't look / until other winters / coiled more empty skins // around the rope' (11). Utting's self-reflexive lines then move toward the specific subject matter of the children for whom she has volunteered: '...Now / you slip / behind these eyes that see // rooms of children / sleeping on pillows of broken glass' (11). The 'broken glass', sharp at many angles and difficult to grasp, evokes multiple images of violence. Utting expresses the hopelessness and struggle of her position with the lines: '... I feel you // inside me about to scream—' (11). The metronomic rhythm of each word builds up to this 'scream' in end position on the line, next to an em dash; the punctuation representing a sharp and internal tension.

'First Light' constructs a representation of Utting's first encounter with the orphanage. The poem surveys the environment, intertwining observations with brief reportages, hinting at dangers in the surrounding area:

In the gardens, cannas have spread
and the grass has grown untidy.
This farmer sleeps
with his loaded guns.

The bridge has long ago been
swallowed
by mopani trees. (12)

Utting then takes the reader into the domestic setting of a kitchen where a woman sings as she works. Utting asks the woman, whom she identifies as the 'kitchen maid', 'What song is that?' (12), to which the woman replies, 'A song for my children' (12). This response situates Utting once more into the position of a visitor; a person who will enter, and then leave. That Utting both recognises and accepts this positioning is evident in what is perhaps the most powerful observation of the poem:

The maid can put her mind inside
the mind —
What does it say?
You are not my child.
— of another living being and tell
you where it has been. (12)

The first and last lines of this stanza are parenthetical, encouraging the eye to read and then follow the lines around again in a circular motion. The stunning construction of this stanza represents a cycle of thoughts, of memory and reminiscence, and provokes us to consider how our interactions with others influence our thinking processes and imagination. The poem also allows Utting to posit both her presence and her representation of that presence, as ethical concerns.

The ethical considerations of *Flame in the Fire* are also detailed in a conference paper Utting delivered on the subject of witness poetry. Utting's critical work (Utting 2011) may be viewed as complementary to this poetry collection, as she specifically addresses the practice-led research involved in determining her position as a witness poet. Throughout the paper, Utting identifies the key features associated with witness poetry, with particular focus on the lyric and how the tendency of witness poets to employ the lyric demonstrates 'the suitability of the lyric 'I' to accommodate a variety of viewpoints and positional slippages' (Utting 2011: 3). Poems such as 'Screaming Pianissimo' (17) beautifully capture the disconcerting ways in which memories and imagination influence the position from which we speak. As Utting writes in the poem: 'This undersong of poems / plagues my memory // surcingle thick' (17).

The poetry of *Flame in the Fire* is divided into three sections: 'Ways of Seeing', 'Return to Kangerong' and 'Things Foreknown'. This order, as well as being a guide for the reader, is also suggestive of the ways in which memories are formed and how they continue to influence our future thoughts. Utting's narration is torn between her painful memories and the desire to represent them. The subject matter of 'Back-row Boy' (25) is perhaps the most disturbing of the collection. In an unnervingly measured tone Utting looks at a photograph of a boy who 'resembles / [her] elder son so / hunched over his books' (25) and a fondness of

memory is created, the boy revealing a smile Utting ‘loved to love down the years’ (25). However, Utting then reveals the fate of this boy and the complex psychological consequences of trauma are left for the reader to infer. The reader, just like Utting herself, does not ‘want to know / he will turn out bad’ (25), the resonance of the word ‘bad’ having an unsettling effect, much like the entire collection itself. *Flame in the Fire* urges the reader to feel complicit in the act of witnessing.

The concluding poems in *Flame in the Fire* create an uncanny juxtaposition of Utting’s personal traumas with the atrocities that she has witnessed elsewhere. The collection ends with the haunting poem, ‘Things Foreseen’. Utting conveys in this poem how experiences scratch at our thoughts ‘like mice in broken straw’ (66), and how her ‘inside mourning’ lurks ‘behind [her] eyes’ (66).

Works cited

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