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HILLARY, KEVIN AND JULIA; MARGERIE, RUMWOLD AND JEFF

Liquid Nitrogen by Jennifer Maiden
Giramondo Publishing, pp. 86 \$24

The Odour of Sanctity by Amy Brown
Victoria University Press, pp. 240 \$35

What does poetry have to do with the news? Quite a lot. As Jahan Ramazani points out in his essay in *A Companion to Poetic Genre* (2012) – using Seamus Heaney’s poetry of 9/11 and the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland as an example – poetry can free events from the here-and-now, situating them in wider temporal or cultural contexts to allow deeper understanding of that fleeting thing: ‘the news’.

In Australia, there is no ‘newsier’ poet than Jennifer Maiden, but she handles things differently from Heaney. While both are interested in topical events and their relationship with the past, for Maiden the here-and-now is at least as important as the distant past. Maiden, unlike Heaney, does not view the past as having inherent cultural authority. We see Maiden’s valuing of the contemporary in the way her poems repeatedly, almost flippantly, reanimate the dead by having them simply ‘wake up’ in contemporary times. We also see the importance of the here-and-now in Maiden’s attention to the moment-by-moment processes of thought and poetic invention. ‘Diary Poem: Uses of Liquid Nitrogen’, for instance, comically narrates the contingency of its own composition: ‘Somewhere in this poem, I may describe / a beautiful experiment’.

As this example suggests, Maiden’s poetic repurposing of the news is notably playful, with play being the opposite – as the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott theorised – of compliance, something contemporary events and their representation usually involve. Maiden’s last three collections – *Friendly Fire* (2005); *Pirate Rain* (2010); and *Liquid Nitrogen* (2012) – all deal with the serious events of the world, such as war and politics, in playfully uncompliant ways. These brilliant books form a kind of trilogy in which contemporary events, people and their representation in the media promiscuously mix with personal reminiscence, diaristic accounts, history, theorising and political statement.

Those not familiar with Maiden’s late style may find the opening poem of *Liquid Nitrogen*, ‘The Year of the Ox’, a challenging one, as it jumps sharply from personal reminiscence to literary allusion, political history, and discussion of contemporary events. The poem introduces the collection’s

main characters, who are both real and fictional, in an unsettling mix of realism and fantasy, and it introduces the collection's main themes and motifs. As such, it acts like a vast, complicated overture. But the poem is also a coherent work in its own right, a virtuosic weaving together of the opposing forces of mother and daughter, figured respectively as 'Ox' and 'Tiger'; Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale; discussion of poetry as an inherently 'digital' (that is, binary) form; the inauguration of Julia Gillard as Prime Minister; and a concluding reminder of 'the latest dead in Afghanistan', underscoring the elegiac element of Maiden's struggle with contemporary events and their media representation. But this elegiac moment is matched – as you would expect from a book concerned with binary oppositions – with comic moments, such as the observation that Hillary Clinton 'had two dimples. One / was exasperated, matronly. The other / was cherubic and luscious'.

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The pursuing of intricate interrelationships, as seen in 'The Year of the Ox', also occurs at the macro level. There is considerable crossover between Maiden's last three collections in terms of subjects, tone, and procedure, as seen in the use of discontinuous sequences. These include the 'George Jeffreys' poems, in which Jeffreys and his girlfriend, Clare Collins, pop up in unlikely places. In *Friendly Fire*, for instance, Clare can't believe that Jeffreys saved George Bush Jnr from choking to death on a pretzel.

In *Liquid Nitrogen*, these poems continue, as do the imaginary dialogues (which first appeared in *Pirate Rain*) between Hillary Clinton and her political inspiration, Eleanor Roosevelt, along with dialogues between Julia Gillard and Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, and Kevin Rudd with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The deadpan tone employed for these unlikely dialogues underscores their moral comedy. For instance, 'Hillary and Eleanor 8: The Audience' – about a meeting between Clinton and Rudd – begins hilariously with 'Eleanor Roosevelt woke up next to Dietrich / Bonhoeffer and realised that this was / not Chelsea's wedding'. As with many of Maiden's poems, the poem's closing line contains a mordant sting.

In her review of *Liquid Nitrogen* in the *Sydney Review of Books*, Gig Ryan observed that Maiden is mild on Rudd and more censorious of

Gillard. I rather sadly agree with this observation, but it is important to remember that Maiden is not writing opinion pieces in *The Age*. The playfulness and insight of Maiden's accounts of Gillard make them a world away from the relentless attacks Gillard has received in the media and elsewhere. Maiden, of course, wrote these poems before such attacks reached their peak. As such, Maiden's 'newsy' poems may seem to face the danger of the news outrunning the poems' own moments, but the integrity of the moment – of the representation of thought as ceaseless and surprising – is central to Maiden's project. Maiden is unsurprisingly self-conscious about her poetic use of political figures. In 'Diary Poem: Uses of Liquid Nitrogen', the motif of the chemical stands for the poetic process itself:

Liquid Nitrogen

– the use of the frozen suspension which is risky
but also fecund and has beauty – is how
I would see those of my poems in which public
figures discuss things with their inspirations,
not for example that I've 'shredded' Gillard's
'interest in Nye Bevan', as some critic
perhaps strategically misunderstood.

Where Maiden uses the news, the Melbourne poet Amy Brown employs history and legend in her second book, *The Odour of Sanctity*. And where Maiden tends to the expansive, Brown works on an even larger scale, employing that oxymoronic form, the contemporary epic. The epic has a decidedly ambivalent relationship with modernity. The long narrative poem of heroic action set in remote or legendary times is fundamentally a premodern form, though its relationship with the rise of modern concepts (such as the nation) is well-documented. Most contemporary epics rely on fragmentation and an inbuilt, ironic sense of failure. Brown's solution to the 'problem' of the contemporary epic is an elegant mix of narrative and fragmentation, irony and lyricism.

The Odour of Sanctity concerns six candidates for sainthood (some of whom already are saints), ranging from Augustine, the church father, to Jeff Mangum, the founding member of that quintessentially 90s 'indie' band, Neutral Milk Hotel. Between these temporal extremes, Brown tells the stories of the poet Christina Rossetti; the mystic Margery Kempe; Elizabeth of Hungary; and Rumwold, the seventh-century infant who allegedly

