

• AUSTRALIAN POETRY: GEOFF PAGE

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Petra White's *Reading for a Quiet Morning* (GloriaSMH, 70pp, \$27.95) is different, not only from Wearne's lighthearted student romp but from White's own earlier work. Her publisher calls it White's "wisest" book so far but it may be fairer to call it her most adventurous.

Almost 50 of its 70 pages are taken up with her long poem *How the Temple was Built*, a reworking of, and elaboration on, the Book of Ezekiel. As White says in an endnote: "This poem is very loosely based on the biblical Book of Ezekiel, with which it takes considerable liberties." Among these liberties is the addition of a key character, Esther (unconnected to the biblical Book of Esther).

*How the Temple was Built* is not an easy poem to describe. Suffice to say that it has something in common with Arthur Boyd's biblical paintings and, arguably, with Ted Hughes's book-length poem *Crow*. The language is based in Old Testament rhetoric but taken further metaphorically and, sometimes with its diction, considerably updated. It is satisfyingly physical and metaphysical at the same time (as is Hughes's *Crow*).

A nice index of White's linguistic and attitudinal innovations can be found in a couple of sentences from the poem's final section: "He slips outside and crouches by the river. / Soon he will be fifty / and retire from the priesthood. Being a visionary / was much more fun than being a priest. But God / has not leaned on him for years and he misses / how the old coot would mess with his head." Most of the poem is more lyrical than this but the idea of being a visionary as having "fun", and of Yahweh as "the old coot", is more than a little persuasive.

A second important poem in the book is *Filial*, White's elegy for her mother, who from the evidence of the poem, seems to have had

six children and died at the relatively early age of 58. It's a poem of conflicted emotions, frugal with biographical detail, but powerful in its accretive effect.

A few lines from its opening stanza, the deathbed scene, suggest its emotional range and complexity:

*Things she was and nothing she is*

*pressure this breath, and a god*

*shakes her like a tin of money*

*and she gives up air that speaks*

*the one thing*

*she would say if she could speak.*

*My psychoanalyst said remember her*

*before she failed you — but she collapses*

*in my mind*

*like a foal.*