

Jazz Money on the power of poetry

The Age, 12 Aug 2022

by Jazz Money

Poetry has existed on this continent for millennia. It is an endlessly adaptable form held in the mouths and fingers of anyone who knows the power of language. Though the bells heralding the death of poetry have rung many times over, all statistics in Australia indicate the genre is now enjoying its highest level of success when judged on the metrics of book sales, books published, awards won, dedicated journals and uptake by readers and writers alike.

But in many ways poetry still operates on the margins, a hard-to-contain genre on the back shelf of many bookstores. Yet in times of need people turn to poetry. And perhaps it is due to that place in the margins, looking in from the edge, that real truths can be offered.



Jazz Money: "The ambition of poetry in many ways is to answer the most human thing of all - how do we exist with all this?"
(Photo: Kate Geraghty)

Poetry is ambitious in its marriage of form and function, where the great themes of humanity, planet and spirit can be strung on a few words, and where likewise, the very intimate, domestic and quiet can be celebrated with equal weight. It is the space where light and dark meet, where complexity and simplicity are revealed in every shade.

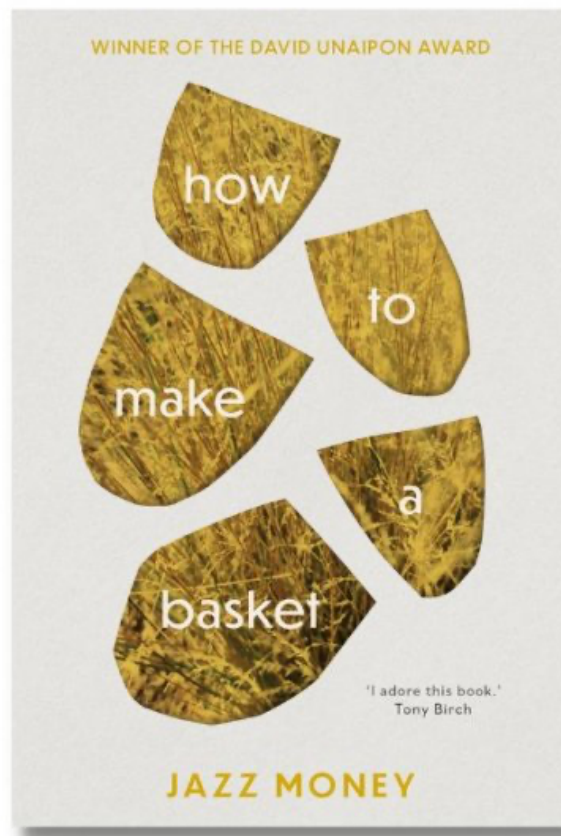
Poetry turns on a word; each breath and beat counts. This is an oral tradition that goes the whole way back, and no one knows the power of story, rhythm and layer better than Blakfellas. So, it makes sense that all our celebrations, our gatherings and (since colonisation) our protests have been marked with the power of story and poetics ringing out into the very hearts of those who hear those words. This has never been a tired form, and some of the greatest poets of this place have never been published, the ambition greater than book sales.

The daily tool of English, a language that is so often stale in its everyday practicality, is transformed through the mouth of a poet, gaining power and poignancy. Poets give new meaning to tired words and, in doing so, create new ways of understanding situations where the old words failed to bring clarity.

While traditionally Western societies have marked moments of significance with poetry – graduations, weddings, funerals – poetry is a form where the everyday becomes eternal. We are increasingly needing poetics to mark moments both large and small.

Poetry is a form that is held stronger in some communities than others. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use poetry to subvert the colony, to make fun, to celebrate love; it is a tool that can reckon with the unreckonable.

Queer folk, too, are used to sitting in a place of shadow in our society, observing while being observed. It is a place between language. So, it makes sense that some of this continent's most astounding writers are Indigenous, queer, people of colour, people with a disability and anyone operating outside the mainstream, for these are people who understand the power of words to shape and unmake the world.



Jazz Money's debut poetry collection How to Make a Basket.

In times of turmoil or hardship, societies return to poetry; instability at the centre pushes everyone to a place that was once the edge. The oral tradition long ago transmuted to the page has adapted once again to the digital age, where a line, a stanza, a poem can be shared instantly, globally, connecting in the minds of those who seek depth from this world and its muddle of words. In a time of pandemic, where digital often became the only source of closeness, poetry can communicate what everyday language fails to capture.

In crisis we turn to places where complexity is held up and examined, where it is possible to consider without seeking a single truth. One poem can often be consumed in a few minutes, on the bus or before bed, leaving the reader feeling nourished and connected to the vastness of the world and its many occupants, accomplishing in a page what many novels struggle to do.

It is within the brevity and economy of language that we get to the heart of why so many of us write in this form. The ambition of poetry in many ways is to answer the most human thing of all – how do we exist with all this? How can we remind one another of our humanity? How can we connect with people whose lives are radically different from our own, or understand the grandness of this planet and the minutiae of its details? What, other than communication with the grandest remit of emotions, of connection, could be more ambitious than that?