

Dominique Hecq reviews Jeri Kroll's *Workshopping the Heart*. 2013. Adelaide: Wakefield Press.

Jeri Kroll's new collection of selected poems is titled *Workshopping the Heart*. It does just that. It takes you into the chambers of the human heart as it pulses and courses with blood through arteries, uncovering dark recesses and pools of light. There is love, there is pain, there is fear, there is grief, there is disappointment and jealousy, there is wonder, there is joy, and there is ambivalence. It is a peripatetic heart and so we travel for pleasure, for work or for duty to New York, Ireland, India, And we get around Australia, too, of course, especially the hills and beaches of Adelaide where we are acquainted with cockatoos and snakes and lizards and kestrels and corellas. There are also dogs and horses and rats and possums. And there is a magnificent cat. The tone of this collection is dark and hypnotic, laconic and sometimes ingrained with some painful seriousness. It's a peculiar seriousness to define and I think it comes from the honest, if not ruthless, workshopping. Easiness, a mild wit, a simple pleasure in living, even real gaiety and tenderness are within Kroll's range, but for all the subtlety of rhythm and plainness of speech she is too much of an insightful observer for sustained light-mindedness.

It seems that Jeri is a poet of one subject that chose her rather than she it, that made her a poet, to which she gives herself wholeheartedly. Her title is therefore unusually accurate: this collection of two hundred pages comprising old and new poems as well as excerpts from *Vanishing Point*, a verse novel, and *House of Arrest*, is for workshopping the heart--relationships are difficult, kaleidoscopic, life-creating and renewing, between men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, and also women and their bodies. At times it is as though the poem creates the woman and feelings create the poet and the poem. Perhaps it's as simple as that, in the mind; in life it is anything but simple, except in the way it seems to galvanise this poet.

Some of my favourites in this collection are 'Millennium Sun', 'Eves-dropping', 'Leaving Home', 'Nuclear Race', 'Skin', 'Final Copy', 'Touching the Air', and all the poems about being a mother. What impressed me most about these poems is not so much their extreme economy and concentration on one experience, and the extent to which, having taken this

experience for granted as a reality with no escape, the poet is yielded the returns she seems to want, deep down inside. Jeri Kroll gives us here a speech and a style of living that, like all styles, is half-instinct and half-premeditation; the two work uncommonly well.

This is a condensed version of a speech given at the 18<sup>th</sup> AAWP Conference in Canberra, November 27, 2013 to launch Kroll's book.