



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

## Michelle de Kretser

Launch Speech for Michelle Cahill's *Letter to Pessoa*  
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I'm very grateful to Michelle Cahill for inviting me to launch *Letter to Pessoa*, a collection of prose texts as marvellous and weird and haunting as a lucid dream. As you know, Michelle is a widely acclaimed poet. How wonderful to have this opportunity to celebrate her first book of fiction.

Not that Michelle has left poetry behind – far from it. No reader of this book could fail to notice its poetic sensibility. It manifests itself strikingly in Michelle's deployment of metaphoric language. Here are some examples: church bells 'gag', a radio has a 'chintzy jingle', 'birds croon their urban memos'. Far too often, fiction writers sleepwalk us through their sentences. By contrast, on every page, Michelle's sentences puncture mechanical reading, refusing the threadbare, ready-made phrase. Her language is a bold assertion of the primacy of the figurative imagination. It makes slow readers of us, repudiating the rush to meaning.

This is a book in which textuality proliferates. It offers letters, emails, SMS, not all of which are answered, or received, or even sent. These are words that miscarry, as Michelle puts it. What counts is the act of writing, the constitution of the self through words (so once again, language is asserted over communication). And then, as the title of the book suggests, *Letter to Pessoa* is, among other things, a conversation between texts. It contains a series of letters to writers who matter to Michelle: canonical literary figures for the most part, although there is also a tribute to that high priest of popular culture, Neil Young. These intertextual epistles gesture towards the porous nature of the border between reading and writing. Here, writing has its genesis in the texts that precede it; as the narrator of the story 'Borges and I' puts it, 'Borges suffused me with his precedence.' There's a neat inversion here, whereby writing produces reality, rather than the other way around.

If textuality is one of the structuring tropes of this collection, the other is mobility. I've already alluded to the generic mobility that blurs the border between fact and fiction, between the world and the text. The geographical mobility of Michelle's imagination is equally striking. These are stories that range fluently around the globe. Settings include an ashram in Thailand, an elderly insurgent's house in Nepal, an office in Hong Kong, a war zone in Iraq. The characters are not free-floating individuals, but enmeshed in specific geographies and histories, in political and social grids.



Several texts return to Sydney, and I was particularly struck by Michelle's evocation of the city, which shuns the panoramic, the filmic slickness of the monumental. Instead, Sydney appears in fragmentary, phantasmagoric flashes: a building site, a lighted room in which a party is taking place viewed from outside, the sun dripping down the glass panels of a tower, the newspaper-wrapped roses that mark the site of a road accident.

Ships are an ancient form of mobility, and they appear in more than one story. Most movingly, they take the form of a boat full of asylum-seekers wrecked off the Australian coast. We remember that the ship of state is an old metaphor; the fragile boat transporting refugees comes to grief while the ship of state powers on. But the wreck delivers a psychological shock, momentarily arrests and disrupts the national narrative, alters its course however fractionally.

As I read *Letter to Pessoa*, I became aware that the book is haunted by a different kind of wreck: the violent collision between the self and colonialism. The postcolonial self that emerges from that encounter is never whole and never single. 'What ships are docked within us?' asks the first narrator we meet in this book. The drama of the hybrid self's mutation and splitting is figuratively enacted in the Pessoa-style heteronyms deployed across the book. As with the geographical scope of the settings, the array of characters imaginatively inhabited here is impressive. They range all the way from an American physicist to a *Lolita redux* Sydney teenager to a well-travelled cat. (I'll note in passing that one of the pleasures of this book is its lovely, tender attentiveness towards animals and birds.)

Alvaro de Campos, one of Pessoa's heteronyms, writes that, 'To travel is to feel.' The psychological mobility in this book enables connection and solidarity with the voiceless and the oppressed – most movingly, for me, in two stories. The first is narrated by an Iraqi refugee whose family has been murdered by soldiers. She remembers her dead mother, 'bright as a bed of dahlias', as she contemplates a future made up of 'apologies, administration, charities...visas, regulations, dictionaries'. The second narrative tells the harrowing story of a Filipina maid, exploited and abandoned in Hong Kong. In a summing up at once devastating and deeply empathetic, Michelle writes: 'Circumstances would contrive against Juliette simply because she had tried to escape from their grasp.'

You will remember that the ship of Theseus, referred to in these pages, had all its planks replaced, one by one, as they decayed over time. That paradox of change and continuity runs through these shapeshifting texts in a bold assertion of flux; of life lived 'in transit, on temporary visas'. One of the functions of a shipwreck is to



remind us that destinations can be predicted but never guaranteed; I read this as metaphorically linked to those letters that ‘miscarry’. It is, in an echo of Cavafy, the voyage that constitutes the achievement, the blind and audacious launching of the self, whatever shape it has provisionally assumed, onto the sea of writing. It’s very fitting that the wonderful achievement of *Letter to Pessoa* should end with a question, a rhetorical gesture that refuses the haven of finality in favour of further exploration.

I urge you all to read *Letter to Pessoa* as soon as possible, to immerse yourself in its many enthralling worlds and voices. It remains to me only to offer my warmest congratulations and thanks to Michelle for giving us this intricate and adventurous book – I hope its sails fill up and carry you to the furthest horizons.

Michelle de Kretser is the author of four novels, including most recently, *Questions of Travel*, which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Prime Minister’s Award for Fiction, the Western Australian Premier’s Award and the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal.