

**Cathy Perkins. *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2020. 285 pp.**

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Once a week for two years, I caught the bus from West End to Teneriffe in Brisbane for French classes, stepping off at Skyring Terrace near the new Gasworks Plaza. I was terrible at French and never did my homework, but I persisted out of a lifelong dream of writing in Paris. When I picked up Cathy Perkins's *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*, I realised that I was walking a street with a literary connection: Skyring was the surname of writer Zora Cross's grandfather.

Chance encounters bring us to poetry. In the basement of the Mitchell Library in NSW, a collection of letters led researcher Cathy Perkins to the author of the enormously popular *Songs of Love and Life*, published in 1917. Although this work sold four thousand copies via three reprints, by the time of Cross's death in 1964 the author was slipping into obscurity. Two efforts had been made to draw attention to her importance in Australia's literary history: Dorothy Green's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (1981) and an attempted biography by Michael Sharkey which was abandoned in favour of a biography of Cross's partner, writer David McKee Wright. By the mid-1980s, Perkins writes, Cross had 'fallen so far from literary consciousness that poets Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson felt safe in recommending that the Australian Jockey Club name a horserace after her' (86–87). By contrast Perkins, when she found a reference to *Songs of Love and Life* in the basement among the letters of George Robertson, publisher at Angus and Robertson, she was captivated. She embarked upon 'an obsession with this dead writer, which would reach a point where one of my children asked me on a car trip if Sydney's Cross City Tunnel was named after Zora Cross' (ix).

Discovering Cross via Robertson's letters is an apt metaphor for the structure of *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross* which could, since each chapter is devoted to a prominent relationship in Cross's life, be classified as a relational biography. Life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe how '[r]elationality invites us to think about the different kinds of textual others—historical, contingent, or significant—through which an "I" narrates the formation or modification of self-consciousness' (86). Cross explains that '[e]ach of Zora's relationships showed a different side of her personality and each has its own tensions' (xii), but they also show her intersection with Australia's literary industry in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her relationships with writer and editor Ethel Turner, publisher Bertram Stevens, artist Norman Lindsay, publisher George Robertson, brother John Skyring Cross, friend Rebecca Wiley, lover and poet John McKee Wright, her writing alter ego Bernice May, president of the Fellowship of Australian Writers John Le Gay Brereton and writer Mary Gilmore each affected her subject matter, content, and publication outcomes. The title of the work reflects these relationships, with each chapter revealing something about Zora Cross in the same way that peering at a friend's bookshelves illuminates their tastes and character.

Cross was born in Eagle Farm, Brisbane in 1890 and, as the first chapter reveals, she was a writer from a young age. At nine, she wrote to Ethel Turner, children's author and editor of the Children's Corner in the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, and relayed a brief biography of her short life. Encouraged and emboldened by Turner, Cross continued her accounts of her family and farm life, which was often beset by misfortune, for another decade. In her twenties she branched beyond the Children's Corner, submitting poetry to the *Bulletin* as she studied to become a teacher. She began a correspondence with Bertram Stevens, editor of the *Lone Hand*, a sister publication to the *Bulletin*.

In 1911 Cross married an actor, but left him in Sydney, where she had moved to complete her schooling, and returned, pregnant, to her family in Brisbane. Her baby was born prematurely and lived for only three hours. Cross, having 'misaid' (37) her husband, returned to Sydney that year to finish her teaching degree. Three years later, she was pregnant again, but refused to divulge the father's identity. She hid her condition until, travelling with a drama troupe in north Queensland, she collapsed after a performance. She left the baby with her parents in Sydney and returned to Brisbane to earn her living. She travelled through northern Queensland once more, writing articles on the 'Wonder Land of the North' for the *Daily Mail*. In 1916 she returned to Sydney with her son and became a regular theatre and film critic for Stevens at the *Lone Hand*.

Although Cross's traversing of Australia while pregnant underscores her assertiveness and independence, her intersection with Norman Lindsay brings into sharp relief the conformity which hampered women. When George Robertson prepared to publish Cross's sensuous and sometimes explicit *Songs of Love and Life*, he commissioned Lindsay to create eight illustrations to accompany the poetry. Although Lindsay's work is replete with explicit female forms, the artist 'objected to a married woman, or any woman, writing about sex. He suggested that this "libidinous frenzy" was merely [Cross's] imagination fed by the neglect of "a torpid husband, or no husband," and reading too much Browning' (61) and that, furthermore, women were physiologically incapable of producing love poetry. He claims:

All love poetry comes from the connection of the spinal column and the productive apparatus, and it is a notorious fact that God did not connect the two in woman, in order, no doubt, that they should not waste more important energies in writing love poems. The consequence is that all female passionate literature comes from the ice-chest. (61).

These dubious assertions notwithstanding, Robertson wrote again to request a cover rather than the illustrations, which Cross did not want anyway, preferring the poems to stand on their own merits. Lindsay agreed to the 'lucrative commission' (64).

George Robertson, the mainstay of Cross's career at this time, sent out close to three hundred copies of Cross's book for review. This 'triggered an outpouring from reviewers' across the country, with numerous comparisons of Cross with Sappho. Following his publication of Cross's second book, *The Lilt of Life*, the writing of which left her exhausted and run down,

Robertson sent his assistant Rebecca Wiley to Springwood in the Blue Mountains to look after his author for a month. This began a friendship between the two women, conducted mostly through letters as Cross was consumed with motherhood, writing and money. However, Cross's relationships with both Robertson and Wiley sputtered to an end as Robertson refused to publish more of Cross's work and her requests for money and assistance became increasingly desperate.

While poetry prompted an intense relationship between publisher and author, it also facilitated an actual love affair between Cross and writer David McKee Wright, editor of the Red Page at the *Bulletin*. Wright read Cross's submissions of poetry to the magazine and his responses prompted Cross, then on her performance tour in Queensland in 1916, to produce another set of 'messy letters written on tropical nights to powerful literary men' (149). Although the writers, both married to other people, tried to resist their attraction, they eventually succumbed and moved to Glenbrook with Cross's son in 1919. They had two daughters and lived together until Wright died of heart failure in 1928. Over the next thirty years of her life Cross, facing immense financial difficulty, continued to work hard at her writing to raise money to support her family. She died in 1964 of a heart attack.

Perkins's archival work reveals the casual marginalisation of Australia's women writers in literary history. Although, towards the end of her life, Cross was 'thought to be among the leading female Australian poets of the twentieth century' (ix), by the time of her death she was 'treated coolly or left out of the literary histories that followed' (ix). And, when writers such as Rosa Praed were lifted from obscurity in the 1980s through republication of their writing by presses such as Pandora Press, Cross 'was not among them' (ix).

This is ironic because in 1925 Cross wrote of picking up an 1883 American encyclopaedia in a second-hand bookshop and noticing that women received two-and-a-half pages of recognition, in contrast to fifty-four for men. Spurred by this discrepancy, in 1927 she began to interview her fellow female poets, novelists and short story writers, publishing their profiles in the *Mirror*. Her subjects included poet Kathleen Dalziel, Dulcie Dreamer, Mary Gilmore, Jean Devanny, Elizabeth Powell, Eleanor Dark, Nina Lowe, Gertrude Hart and Nettie Palmer. Cross's interviews canvass the difficulties of juggling writing, housework and motherhood, with her own children often appearing in her pages. In 1935 she penned a series commissioned by the Melbourne *Herald* on 'Women Who Have Helped to Build Australia' which included writer Mary Gilmore. Based on these articles, the ABC commissioned a radio series as part of the 1938 sesquicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet. Cross 'decided to talk only about dead women because the living could speak for themselves' (217).

This process of reclaiming women's voices and contributions was important not just in the 1920s and 30s but remains so today. As Perkins notes, Cross's articles are the only remaining records of the writing lives of many of the women whom she interviewed. Biographers Carole Ferrier and Deborah Jordan, for example, 'cite the *Mirror* interviews to demonstrate how their subjects [Jean Devanny and Nettie Palmer respectively] were viewed by their contemporaries' (179). In light of this, Perkins's technique of rendering encounters between Cross and her

fellow writers in the present tense is apt. For example, an exchange between Cross and a journalist on their way to the Brisbane office of the *Bohemian* in 1915 reveals Cross's vivacity in person and in her stage performances, as well as her ongoing quest to wrest more pay from her editors for her writing. The switch to present tense energises the text and reminds the present-day reader to listen to voices that may be easily obscured.

As she researched, Perkins typed up thousands of words from Cross's letters. She observes that 'it was clear that [Cross] had left behind something just as valuable as her published work: a voice that has not lost its ability to engage the reader' (xi). Perkins's style, too, is engaging, with clear prose, touches of wry humour and a structure that highlights the relationships that shape a writer's life and craft. Like her subject, Perkins has made a valuable and arresting contribution to Australia's literary history.

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### **Works Cited**

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.