

Julia Prendergast, Eileen Herbert-Goodall and Jen Webb, editors. *The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain*. Recent Work Press: Canberra, 2023. 244 pages. AU\$39.95 ISBN 9780645651393 Paperback

Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain was generated from fully integrated, interdisciplinary research. As lead chief investigator of an interdisciplinary team, Julia Prendergast forged a partnership with Swinburne Neuroimaging (SNI), for an exploratory study that was titled Ideasthetic Imagining: Mapping the Brain's Microstates Using Magnetoencephalography. *The Writing Mind* is a sister output to this research.

In 2021, the research team, including Paris Lyons and Benjamin Slade, presented preliminary research findings at the annual conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, and launched *The Writing Mind*, edited by Julia Prendergast, Eileen Herbert-Goodall and Jen Webb.

Writers were commissioned fresh after Covid lockdowns: indeed, the subject haunts and preoccupies many of the 400-word flash, prose, and 40-line poetic pieces. Lyons, who holds copyright on her MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) brain scans, speaks not only of the "strange new world of Covid," but the scans as "a strange battle between art and science, logic and whimsy" (personal communication). Organic and spontaneous energy fires many pieces.

Colour plates of the scans enliven the written texts *and* rest the eyes between emotionally rich texts. Many of the writers, including me, contribute three or more pieces, springboarding off several different colourful scans. Each writer employs, even within their own oeuvre, diverse genres, literary moods and techniques. Some begin with metafictional reflection on process. Some riff on the artificial dye colours of the scans, some see literal meanings as they might when changing focus viewing a Magic Eye puzzle. Some leap into the scans as vehicles for exploring metaphor, telling seemingly unrelated stories in fiction and non-fiction. Some seek esoteric meaning in the image, some find referential links, some project issues of their authorial circumstance and historical time, especially referencing the global Covid pandemic. Regardless of narrative perspective, many pieces feature auto-fiction, a result perhaps, of sudden writing methodologies.

Common subjects—climate change, Covid, consciousness, grief, loneliness, and loss—effloresce in darker themes. In "Synaesthetic Submersion," a response to a chromatic scan, Sue Joseph's protagonist "caged by the cold; caged by fear of contagion," yearns to swim again in "public pools, Covid-slammed shut," but rallies in the final few lines of the piece:

You swim to stretch; to extend; to think; to remember; to feel strong.

To be strong. You are strong (Image 42: 162–63).

Julienne van Loon sees her dark movie scan as a deep comingling, a fluid, filmic and shared place of serenity: "you are ahead of me, as ever" (Image 4: 17). On the other hand, in a lighter yet deadly serious piece, Roanna Gonsalves satirises the quasi-scientific register imposed by governments on locked-down populations in prose about "Belief that the Universe is Made of Stories" (BUMOS):

BUMOS affects not only females, but males, those who reject the gender binary, and some species of sea slug too. (Image 40: 153)

Red scans prove particularly generative. In “Pomegranate,” Paul Hetherington sees love and pain, and “a scarf in Morocco that was stained with blood” (Image 54: 207). In “Intergenerational Trauma in Five Parts,” the same molten image drops Helen Thomas’s protagonist into nightmares about domestic trauma, perpetrated by the father of her son—“Brain on fire. He stood over the cot” but finishes in a redemptive dream of respite: “Calm. Oblivion.” (Image 54: 208–09). In “The Weight of Thought,” Ravi Shankar moves brilliantly in free association from massifs to film history, to “I’d like to keep you on my desk like a chunk of red coral for a paperweight”—and finally in circular fashion to the compression and glacial loss of data (Image 29: 111–12). His “From Mars the Earth Looks Red,” also shows great authority and solar flair (Image 41: 158–59).

Red and orange scans generate intense emotion. In “Fireworks,” Katrina Finlayson’s first-person piece—“smoking a midnight joint on my back deck”—conveys the lonely vigilance of a mother safekeeping a beloved child, writes bereavement—“one life created and one life lost”—and tilts at dreams and fireworks as brief respite (Image 3: 15). In “For a Long Time Now I’ve Been Burning,” Sam Meekings responds to a vivid orange and yellow scan surrounded by blackness, in which he acknowledges his own accelerant mood (Image 6: 25). Julia Prendergast’s volatile orange/red image generates “Rhodes,” a Greek travel escapade which ends with a shock twist about who is safe from whom: “Strobe-lit, I drop the rock on the cat’s head” (Image 15: 62). Quinn Eades begins their response to a bleached-grey image, with bleak personal challenges—bats, illness, possums—and ends with redemptive love (Image 35: 137).

Blue and green scans frequently lend themselves to water imagery and signs of life. In “Aqua Profunda,” Dominique Hecq riffs on life-giving water, wisdom and her protagonist’s lover K, in an imagist confluence that incorporates Botticelli’s shell, a Melbourne swimming pool, and Milton (Image 35: 133). In “Still Life,” Stephanie Green creates a coastal evocation which concludes with an ominous “brief, quiet seizure” suggesting apocalyptic climate change (Image 20: 80). Patrick Allington also sees the benign colours of this scan as fragile memories of “lasts” in our inevitable progress towards marine extinctions but ends on a quirky note: “the caper likes being the last of its kind—the gravitas, the grandeur” (Image 21: 82). Jeri Kroll’s “Chernobyl 35 Years On,” utilises a fresh green scan as sign of nature revivifying, even after a nuclear disaster: “In the exclusion zone, flora and fauna baffle the experts, refusing to disappear. . . . Building codes embedded in their genes.” Her conclusion is tentative (Image 10: 39). My piece, preceding it, infers algal bloom and Indigenous perspective from my own serendipitous pond experience. And thus we see, over and over, the way individuals bring more than they take from images during creative praxis.

I have never associated the colour purple with travel so much as with prose of a certain genre, but in “Smile,” Paul Hetherington treats a violet-coloured brain as a dynamic, elusive secret travel destination (Image 2: 8). Similarly, Sudish Misra sees “The Canals of Venice,” but moves swiftly through frogspawn and on to purple yarn (Image 2: 10). Cassandra Atherton’s protagonist in “Planetary Nebula,” is also in transit, between lovers, whisky drunk in airport lounges, embraced in hotel rooms, “riding the back of the Helix Nebula” (Image 2: 11). In Rebekah Clarkson’s “Boundary Lines,” purple and red morph into clandestine and erotic tenderness between two neighbours: “Desire slices through the wind, skates over the brittle grass” (Image 26: 101). Jeri Kroll’s close to literal and lyrical “Imaging the Future,” grieves the loss of language as a natural part of impending death:

Could this be my brain
snug in its casket of bone... (Image 22: 86)

Multi-colours elicit kinetic responses, simpatico with the methodologies of sudden writing: Jen Webb's frisson of dance imagery in "This is a Photograph of You (for JP)" (Image 5: 21); Katherine Coles's flickering of flames in "When I was Joan of Arc" (Image 5: 22). Image 13, a rainbow explosion, generates Shady Cosgrove's depiction of the tail end of a joyous Sydney Mardi Gras—"The universe has cracked open" (Image 13: 50–51).

Writers who invite readers via the scan to descend into the brain's consciousness facilitate affective writerly responses. In "Punishment," Shady Cosgrove conjures in second person the skull as a Covid-restricted playground within which two drinking companions activate executive conscience to rebel: Vinny "hanging off the slide, eyes caught on the horizon of your frontal lobe," enacts the owner's conscience, and the protagonist, the imagination. She begins playfully and concludes with police menace (Image 33: 125). In "The Fire Inside Your Head," Michael Salcman begins "here lies consciousness," then also uses architecture, physical exercise, and personification to deconstruct parts of the brain (Image 29: 113).

Some of the scans are set together in series, each time titled "Movie." In Nigel Krauth's "Which Is This Strange Being?" the creative writer sees his series as indicative of the brain as last frontier (Image 11: 41–42). Joshua Lobb infers a *Tintin* lunar landscape from his scan (Image 19: 75). In one of my favourite pieces, "The Rabbit," Christine Howe elegantly animates the same purple series as metafictional, a pottery rabbit placed by its troubled creator-potter into a kiln:

one lonely beast amid a platoon
of mother's-day pinch pot

and suffered the scorching heat
with no complaints.

When she was released
She was a tougher version of herself (Image 19: Movie, 76–77)

Metafictional techniques make many pieces more accessible. With great accomplishment, in "Turning," poet Willo Drummond makes/melds cerulean / ceramic / a tentative relationship / a pottery wheel after viewing a film sequence of pod-like brain scans (Image 9: 33). In "Untitled," publisher Shane Strange hits readers with his raw response, perhaps to the commissioning editor:

When Julia asks I think
"It's too difficult to think right now."
It's the drugs and all that.

His participation in this project feels contingent, likely involves weariness and workload, and the purple image baffles his protagonist: "Am I asking too much of myself?"; "it's the drugs" becomes a refrain (Image 3: 13–14).

In all their literary inflexions and explorations, these short pieces, limited to 300–400 words, are accessible and appealing and many are truly excellent. I wish I could have referenced more in this review. As a three-times contributor, I am not entirely objective but nevertheless appreciate conveying the collection's diversity to you.

Some readers, forgetting the time of terror in which many of the pieces gestated, when many casual academics were laid off work and unable to pay their rent, and work advanced in highly charged, sudden storms of industry, might wish to curtail / settle / tame some alliterative and iterative academic expressions. This highly original collection follows two earlier Recent

Work Press productions: *The Incompleteness Book* (2020) and *The Incompleteness Book II* (2021). All writers worked to a short deadline—sometimes as little as a week—and all espouse practice-led creative research. Conceptualisation came about with aesthetic and scholarly sensibility and doubtless this collection strengthened collegiate communities at a crucial low point for the humanities in academia. This work stands as a model of defiant, multidisciplinary, practice-led research.

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