

THE POSTMODERNIST WRITING OF *THE MONKEY'S MASK*

or

How I Came to Write a Lesbian Romance Detective Thriller in Poetry

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I would like to begin by proclaiming my ignorance. I am no expert in any aspect of postmodernism or any of its labyrinthine and elusive theories. During my time spent teaching poetry at the University of Technology, Sydney, I was even more reluctant than the most conservative of my students to throw myself into the broiling ocean of Theory. It was a matter of honour to stick to my elitist guns and always refer to 'books' rather than 'texts'. An aggressive dinosaur, as well as classroom fascist, I insisted that my students read Shakespeare as well as compulsory Derrida.

Yet I found myself humming some of postmodernism's tunes. The most insidious of these was 'All the Bets are Off'. What a liberating message to someone writing in the most highly respected, most marginalised, most revered and unread genre of all - poetry. All the bets are off! You can do anything. Why should 'serious' literature be privileged over pop culture? Or over anything, including conspicuous crap? Now poetry is nothing if not Serious Literature... what would happen if I tried to resuscitate pale and loitering poetry with a fix of healthy, vigorous junk?

Postmodernism says you can play mix and match with genres. The more incompatible the better. What about Poetry and... Detective Lesbian Fiction? Postmodernism promotes a sense of play, fun even. Like a feral alchemist I played in my laboratory, shaking my test tubes, smelting my holy and unholy elements together, praying for a Sacred Marriage rather than a grotesque shotgun wedding. I gave myself permission to read hundreds of Naiads (Mills and Boons for lesbians) as well as classical narrative poetry.

Can poetry be sexy again? Has it lost its 'jouissance'? My ears and groin throbbed with rock music to enhance *The Monkey's Mask* with beat and sizzling temperature. I went to Japanese haiku to earth the book, to give each of the linked poems a visceral sense of the moment. The book's title was pinched from a dark and unfathomable haiku of the great master Basho, and given a demonic, groovy spin.

I'll give you a sip of *The Monkey's Mask* brew with the following poems.

TROUBLE

'Jill'
I challenge the mirror
'how much guts have you got?'

I like my courage
physical I like my courage
with a dash of danger.

In between insurance jobs I've been watching
rock climbers
like game little spiders
on my local cliff

I've got no head for heights
but plenty of stomach
for trouble

trouble
deep other-folks trouble
to spark my engine
and pay my mortgage

and private trouble
oh, pretty trouble

to tidal-wave my bed

I'm waiting

I want you, trouble, on the rocks.

SEX AND POETRY

I never knew poetry
was about opening your legs
one minute

opening your grave the next

I never knew poetry
could be as sticky as sex.

HOW POEMS START

Is this how poems start?

when every riff on the radio
hooks in your throat

is this how poems start?

when the vein under her skin
hooks in your throat

is this how poems start?

when insomnia pounds
like spooked black horses

when the day breaks
like car crash glass

tell me, Mickey,
you knew

tell me

does a poem start
with a hook in the throat?

I don't see my book at its heart as postmodernist. Perhaps because its heart is so important to me. Underneath its postmodern baubles, its postmodern flirt with the reader, this is a deadly serious book, an old fashioned book, about love, death and the twists and turns of sexual ethics. I'm old fashioned enough to throw down my gauntlet to popular fiction, to movies, to pop music, to pop anything and say that Poetry, serious bloody minded Poetry, still deals with these profound human concerns best.