

The Body: An Anthology

Launch: Adelaide, 4 November 2004

J. M. Coetzee

Here it is, the book we are launching today: *The Body: An Anthology*, published by Wakefield Press at \$x.

If we were doing a proper launch, we would put *The Body* in one of the Lohengrin pedal-boats you can see from the window and give it a push and send it down-river to the sea.

What we are doing this evening, however, is what I will call a dry launch.

In one sense *The Body* is the work of the 27 authors, all of them connected with the University of Adelaide, whose writing is represented here.

In another sense it is the work of the four editors – Henry Ashley-Brown, Chelsea Avard, Amy Matthews, and Stephanie Thomson – who devoted hundreds of hours to getting the book into shape.

In a third sense it is, if not the work, then at least the outcome of the energies of the creative writing program at the University of Adelaide, and the teachers in that program.

In a fourth and final sense it is the work of Wakefield Press, who have done their usual praiseworthy job of producing a handsome-looking book and meeting a deadline. To Wakefield Press, an A for book design, an A for printing, an A for binding, an A for marketing thus far, and a B for spelling (I refer to the back cover).

I am sure that everyone here is looking forward to having a chance to dip into *The Body*. But I hope it will also make its way more widely in the world, and be read across the South Australian and national community.

There are of course many ways for a new author to bring his or her work under the eyes of the public today. New technology has made publication easier and quicker than people could have imagined even thirty years ago.

But book publication still remains the most prestigious form of publication. There is nothing quite like being in print, proper print, between the covers of a proper book that you can hold in your hands and smell – above all smell, for there is no more enticing smell than the smell of a book hot off the press – and read and put on a shelf and keep.

For some though not all of our 27 authors, today is the day when they break into print for the first time, and I hope it is a happy day for them.

This is the point at which one is supposed to say that it would be invidious to single out any of the authors. But I am not going to follow protocol. I enjoyed the whole book, from beginning to end, when I read it in typescript a few months ago, but I don't think it is invidious to suggest that when you pick up this book for the first time you may want to page to the pieces by Patrick Allington or Petra Fromm or Sabina Hopfer or Cath Kenneally or Christopher Lappas or Stephanie Thomson or Dena Thorne-Pezet.

The Body emerges from the creative writing program at the University of Adelaide, and has behind it the guiding hands of numbers of teachers and supervisors, including Sue Hosking, Phil Edmonds, Jan Harrow, and above all Tom Shapcott, as well as the financial support of Arts SA operating through the writing program.

There remains, at least in some quarters, a residue of suspicion against creative writing programs. Writers are born, not made, runs the argument. There is no formula for turning a student, even a willing student, even a willing, intelligent student, into a proper creative writer.

Perhaps. But it has never been the ambition of any creative writing program that I have known to turn out a corps of full-time professional novelists and poets every year, in the way that an engineering faculty turns out a corps of full-time professional engineers.

Nor does any creative writing program that I know assert that without certification from a creative writing program you will never be a proper creative writer. (Contrast engineering, contrast medicine, contrast law, and so forth: without certification you simply aren't allowed to practise the profession.)

Now and again a graduate of a creative writing program turns into a writer of stature. But then, now and again a graduate in medicine, or anthropology, or even engineering, will have second thoughts about what they are doing with their life, and seek their salvation in the creative arts. Now and again someone with no academic background at all becomes a writer of stature.

That's fine. There are no rules for becoming a writer. Artists have always popped up out of nowhere, like lights coming on in the dark. We have never had any idea who will be the next one to pop up, or when, or where.

The job of creative writing programs is not to produce certified writers. It is to offer students time and opportunity and a guiding hand at a stage in their lives when they are exploring themselves – exploring the depth and nature of the creative impulse in them, exploring their emotions and their emotional range, exploring the mystery of other lives, exploring literary forms, exploring their feel for language.

The second task of a creative writing program is to give its students a sense of the profession. Writing is a vocation, but not everyone who would like to be called is called. Being a creative writer is not the only thing a training in writing can prepare you for. The world of letters may in the first place be held up on the shoulders of writers, but it also held on the shoulders of critics and reviewers, of editors and designers and publishers and booksellers, all setting themselves a professional standard. It will do critics and reviewers and editors and designers and publishers and booksellers no harm to find out at first hand how hard it is to invent something out of nothing, day after day.

So here we have it: *The Body: An Anthology*, the work of thirty-odd young writers. Which of them are going to make it to the top, which are going to struggle along but not in the end make it, which are going to decide that there are after all more pressing and more satisfying things to do with their time than making up stories? I haven't the faintest idea. To answer that question we will need to arrange a reunion here in Jolley's Boathouse in ten or twenty years' time.

Thank you.

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