

# A Poem and A Prayer

**IN AN INCREASINGLY SECULAR WORLD, ONE WOMAN HAS SOUGHT OUT AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE TRADITIONAL BALM OF PRAYER.**

“LET US PRAY.” What reaction do those words produce in you? How would you feel if those words were followed by, “Let’s read a poem?” Is the feeling something akin to rising panic? That would be publisher Donna Ward’s guess. “This is a shame,” says Ward, “and it’s also completely wrong because you don’t actually mean it.”

Ward is the founder of Inkerman & Blunt, the publisher behind *Prayers of a Secular World*, a book of meditations on living in a “post-religious world”. Edited by poets Jordie Albiston and Kevin Brophy, this collection features the work of more than 80 contemporary Australian poets. Well-known names, such as Judith Beveridge and David Brooks, sit beside a constellation of new voices – each offering blessings, epiphanies, odes and elegies that can be used in everyday life, or poems that raise the big questions of faith, meaning and doubt.

Forthright and articulate, Ward refuses to accept either poetry’s shadow-life or the drab spiritual landscape our society has seemingly engineered for itself. She has always had a sense of faith and mystery, and topped up her Anglican churchgoing and Catholic schooling with introductions to Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, before becoming a theosophist. So it is hardly surprising when she says, “those kind of eternal truths that go through all those religions are fascinating to me”.

Ward’s background was in social work, and before her involvement with an anthology of West Australian poets in 2007, she knew nothing about poetry. “But I do have a passion for the underdog, and when I was discovering that there were huge

hurdles that poets have to jump [over] in this country, the social worker in me leaped out,” she said. She founded *Indigo*, the WA creative writing journal, and more recently has edited *Sotto*, Australian Poetry’s online magazine, before establishing Inkerman & Blunt.

But the real epiphany came after moving to Melbourne in 2011, when Ward wrote a report on the Black Saturday bushfires and the aftermath. “I went through a lot of the memorial services and as I saw those images, I felt there was a real hollowness in the faces. Even in the faces of the priests I felt there was a bewilderment and a sense of loss.” Something about modern society was failing us in times of tragedy, she realised.

Ward began thinking about poetry’s potential as a source of healing, and of poems as a new source of prayer in a secular world, even though “most of the poets I know would tell me they’re atheists”. As she points out, with some satisfaction, this didn’t stop them responding strongly to the idea. Perhaps because, as co-editor Kevin Brophy concludes: “When a poem seemed an expression of what we feel has worth in our lives, though no price or practical function can be attached to it, then the poetry was prayer. Most poetry fits this description.”

Poet Andy Jackson, who appears in the collection, makes a similar point: “I spent a fair amount of my teens and early twenties as a (relatively) fundamentalist Christian, and as that faded away, poetry seemed to take its place... Poetry is a much better container for mystery and the communal, because it’s not afraid of failure or accidents.”

Ward’s first move was to consider the types of things people instinctively

address in prayer – thanksgivings, intercession, everyday wonder, or transitions in life – and put those ideas out there. “I got back something that was quite complex and difficult to understand!” she says, with a rueful laugh. “What stood out was the extent to which we find the sacred in the everyday. There was a whole lot of everyday domestic stuff – and I guess that’s the essence of my project in a way, because that’s where the secular is.”

As with Inkerman & Blunt’s successful publication *Australian Love Poems*, Ward wanted to let the poetry guide the structure of the book. Meredith Ortega’s poem ‘Eucalyptus Regnans’, about the Kinglake fire, goes to the heart of Ward’s intention. “I was drawn to the contradictory nature of secular prayers,” says Ortega. “I went to a school in the middle of nowhere and we had to recite the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ and it covers all the bases, you know. So it’s like taking that prayer and shaking the Lord out of it, and seeing what’s left. ‘Eucalyptus Regnans’ is about what’s left after the fire.”

After a fire it can be hard to see beyond the ashes, as many people living in Australia today would know. In the words of the book’s co-editor Jordie Albiston, “There seems to hover a sense of uneasy things these days: a lack of kindness; a narrow-mindedness; a fear of the other.” But she goes on to say that editing the book affected her in a strange and unexpected way. “It helped me believe in goodness again. It helped – by way of poetry – redeem humanity for me.”

by **Peter Kenneally**

» *Prayers of a Secular World* is out now.

