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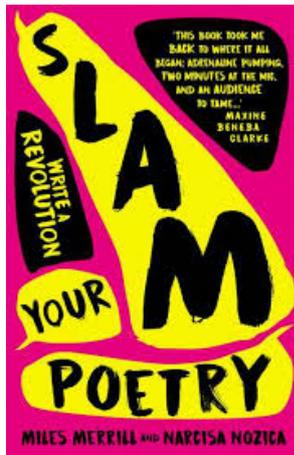
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TEXT Review

Slam Poetry: You say you want a revolution?

review by Dominic Symes



Miles Merrill & Narcisa Nozica

Slam Your Poetry: Write a Revolution

NewSouth Publishing, Sydney NSW 2020

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‘The Emerging Older Poets mentorship is designed to address the lack of opportunities in the 55+ age bracket,’ reports the Queensland Poetry Festival’s website. ‘So many great writers come to their craft later in life and create wonderfully rich and meaningful work as a result.’ In 2017 the Australian Poetry Slam was won by Solli Raphael, who was twelve at the time he delivered his poem ‘Australian Air’ to a packed Sydney Opera House. Both examples demonstrate the changing face of poetry in Australia. They highlight how the poetry mainstream, fed by universities and the well-worn tributaries of established

publication methods (magazines, journals and small presses), is being burst open by a flood of writers, young and old, who are writing from the margins. For those currently working in academia, it is vital to consider how the prevailing norms of who makes poetry and how poetry can be disseminated are being challenged by this new cohort of writers, many of whom are debuting their work at open mics and slams.

Australia is a more culturally diverse society than it was a generation ago when poetry was taught as ‘composition’ in universities, acting as an extension of an English literature curriculum. Slam Poetry has played a vital role in the most recent part of this expansion by targeting and removing barriers to participation to make poetry more accessible.

Understanding this shift makes Miles Merrill and Narcisa Nozica’s book, *Slam Your Poetry: Write A Revolution* a compelling survey of the first decade of slam’s existence in Australia. History tells us that any revolution worth fighting for seeks to flatten out entrenched hierarchies, and relies upon a ground-up movement of committed individuals who encourage ongoing collective action. By rejecting the academic pretensions of poetry written for the page (the type that is read out at ‘readings’), slams are welcoming to people from all backgrounds as they encourage poets to tell their stories rather than asking them to make informed references to previously existing work. Although the authors of this book are not seeking such a lineage, slams do add a new chapter to the radically egalitarian traditions of Australian performance poetry extending back at least as far as the 1960s, if not longer. It is worth mentioning that prototypes for an anti-establishment, performance-based poetics were present in works published by members of the ‘Generation of ‘68’¹ and in the ongoing work of *Collective Effort Press*, who from 1978 to 1983 published 925, a magazine of workers’ poetry, and who continue to publish *Unusual Work*, a ‘countercanonical’ journal in which ‘[r]adical politics’ and ‘radical formal experiment’ frequently converge (Carruthers 2017: np).

Where many other forms of poetry can be understood by their relationship to the canon (whether that be imitation of, elaboration on or pastiche of), slam directly and forcefully rejects the canon of page poetry taught at high school and university. At times, this can be a source of frustration for an institutionally trained poet when a poem performed at a slam seems to overlook an entire relevant body of work – for example, a slam poem about queer identity that would only be improved by its reader having read poets from the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School or the poets of the Mardi Gras resistance here in Australia – still, there is no question that much of that canon has been predominantly written by people bearing positions of privilege. That in itself is reason to look to the future rather than the past. It is exciting to see a movement in the process of creating its own heroes, reporting on its own success stories, and finding its own place amongst the landscape of poetry in Australia. That slam is unfolding as we speak, and that it is changing this landscape for the better, make this an important artform to contend with.

Like many other revolutionary movements, the blueprint has been transplanted from elsewhere. As recounted by Merrill, slam was initiated by Marc Kelly Smith in Chicago in the 1980s, where writers ached for an alternative to the self-indulgent and inherently exclusive poetry readings that were common at the time (2020: 8-9, 86). The effect this had on creating a ‘popular poetry’ was immediate (McGowan 2016: 69). A slam was a rejection of all of the common tropes of a page-poetry reading. Instead of reading for ten or twenty minutes each, poets would have 2 minutes to deliver their material. Instead of sitting down, poets would stand up and project their voices. Instead of being invited to read, poets would sign up at the beginning of the event. Instead of being judged (formally or informally) by established, older poets, poets would be judged by audience members, selected by various means of random assortment. In other words, ‘[i]t is not a shaking-piece-of-paper-in-hand, mumble-abstract-rhymes and look-at-the-floor-for-20-minutes poetry reading’ (1). This prevents the audience from becoming bored, it prevents the poet from being overly self-indulgent, it prevents the judges from pedalling a particular bias. As a way of encouraging poets who would have otherwise never imagined themselves *reading* their work in front of an audience to *perform* their work in an engaging and entertaining way, it is easy to see how such a movement could gain traction here in Australia.

‘Part how-to guide, part masterclass, part manifesto’, Merrill and Nozica’s book aims to help ‘students, teachers and wannabe poets of all ages join the spoken word revolution’ (np). From Merrill’s first section, which describes the how and why of slam poetry, into the second section written by Nozica, it is clear both authors see education at the forefront of the revolution. Merrill, as one of the earliest proponents of slam in Australia (indeed the founder of the Australian Poetry Slam) has cleverly teamed with Nozica, who is an award-winning educator, with experience of teaching slam poetry to children. For many of us the experience of being taught poetry in high school felt like partaking in an exercise determined to put students off ever reading poetry again, let alone writing it. Nozica and a new generation of English teachers are helping students to encounter poetry through performance rather than the page with great success.

As many of us working in the academy know, it can difficult to adequately teach and assess creative work: on the one hand, there are students who need a lot of coaxing to allow themselves be creative, and on the other hand there are those who need to be encouraged to pay more attention to the exercise and the prescribed texts; to stay on task, rather than following flights of imagination. Exercises informed by performance poetry and slam like those Merrill details for the individual poet in ‘Part 1: Write to Speak’ titled ‘Ten ideas to make your writing jump’ (23-72) and those which Nozica details for the classroom in ‘Part 3: Teach a Revolution’ called ‘Chapter 9: Awaken the artist within’ (226-284) are impressive for how they encourage writers to get words together quickly. They allow students to get words together within the space of a lesson and to perform those words in front of their peers within the same lesson. This is certainly a ground-breaking proposition

for anyone who has, like me, tried to encourage shy or otherwise reluctant students to engage passionately with poetry.

Nozica's sample lessons provide ways for teachers to encourage students to look within themselves and find experiences which were emotional in an effort to express these in such a way which retains and conveys as much of this emotion as possible. Where I have seen slam and performance poetry exercises overstep is by pressing inexperienced writers to bring their trauma to the surface in the hope that it will enable them to achieve a good grade for their assignment. One might argue the opacity and difficulty of page poetry provides armour against this potentially harmful exposure, but on the other hand this can make writers and their audiences feel distanced from the 'real' meaning of the work itself. What I found most useful was considering how poetry as performance borrows techniques and language from theatre. Merrill outlines some of these in 'Ten tricks to make your performance fly' (87-121). One of these was to play with Character and Voice (51-57), as in a drama class, students are encouraged not to rely wholly on pathos, but rather to engage with the entire spectrum of emotions; to adopt characters and voices in order to step outside of their own experiences, allowing them to imagine the experiences of others; to '[e]mpower others' (57). This sentiment though can be easily buried beneath the messages of encouragement for personal expression that Merrill and Nozica expound: 'You are there to express yourself', writes Merrill, 'it's all about you' (22). Perhaps relaxing the emphasis on personal expression is something which is more difficult for inexperienced poets to achieve at a slam when they have entered under their own name and are standing silently in front of a microphone and an expectant crowd, or when they are in a classroom with their peers as opposed to submitting a poem written on the page to be blind read for a journal or magazine, but nonetheless Merrill and Nozica are trying to encourage a kind of poetry that is fuelled by emotion aimed at eliciting strong emotions. This is poetry designed to 'change minds (a little bit)' (87).

On emotion, it is often the case that powerfully felt emotion can be used as a blunt instrument: a full stop which precludes comment or criticism of creative work. Nozica is aware of this fact when she discusses how to 'Fuel the writing process with feedback' (262-267). Poetry, as taught at university, is a technical skill which is learned in a workshop setting by following and building upon the examples of others. There are prescribed readings and grades are given based upon how well the student is able to comprehend these texts as evidenced in their own creative work. A portion of their grade will be given on how well they are able to reflect upon their work. Rather than being an anti-canonical revolution based upon expression and only expression, Nozica outlines a new canon of performance poetry and encourages the same technical focus as has been advocated in institutions for page poetry. Nozica's section of the book is a thorough guide for teachers in how to engage students in a love of poetry, not just the sound of their voice. It also gives poets who are

finding their voice the opportunity to develop and sharpen their skills for a lifetime of making poetry.

When it comes to using language creatively, there are many aspects of slam from which the academy could learn. Many page-poets like myself are guilty of the exact things which Merrill lambasts us for (the introspection, the opacity, the lack of vocal projection) and ideas in Part 1, whilst basic and aimed at an inexperienced reader, retain a lot of useful reminders about just how vital ideas like dialect, tense, perspective and metaphor can be when creating poetry. Similarly, the hierarchy of poetry in Australia that relies upon established journals and publishing houses seems clunky and outmoded when compared with the simple how-to, step-by-step guide set out in the second Merrill section of the book ‘Part 2: Set up a slam’ (145-165). What seemed so remarkably simple was encouraging participants to invest in the slam – literally, by paying for their participation – such that the audience gets to see more poets perform, there is a much greater chance of having a sizeable prize to give the winner and there is an element of the event which encourages rather than limits participation. As someone who runs a poetry reading myself, I especially loved the tips about how to use a microphone properly at a poetry reading (115-116) as a microphone giving its user ‘feedback’ is a sure-fire way to reduce the potency of the poet’s performance. All poets could benefit from a quick guide to that particular piece of equipment. Equally, I was excited to have so many suggestions for new poets whose work I might be able to find on YouTube to share with a class. The most enjoyable part of reading this book was being granted access to a whole new canon of poets which I can incorporate into my own teaching.

It also made me interrogate a chip I had on my shoulder about slam as a genre, or a style of poetry rather than a poem or piece developed to be performed at an event. As Jakob Schweppenhäuser and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen write in ‘Performing Poetry Slam’, this is a common misnomer. ‘We are here entering a complex terminological terrain’, they write,

The term “poetry slam” refers to a *contest* in which performers of different kinds of oral poetry are competing; the term “slam poetry”, on the contrary, refers to a certain kind of poetry that has emerged from these competitions. (2017: 66)

In the words of the late poet and activist Candy Royalle, whose contributions to the *Slam Your Poetry: Write a Revolution* include short insights contained in speech bubbles throughout the text: ‘One thing I’d like to see change is the imitation of the American slam style, which has a very recognisable cadence and delivery style’ (52). In my research on slam I came across ‘Button Poetry’, an American YouTube channel which would fit the above description, being a series of monologues, performed with a type of evangelical fervour that if the words were written down would retain about as much substance as the paper they were written on. Slam doesn’t have to be like this, in fact, by definition it isn’t,

and thankfully, most slam in Australia is far more engaging and formally interesting. It made me grateful that the advent of slam poetry in Australia has come at a time where as a society we seem less concerned than ever with the influence of American culture. As one example, *Fire Front: First Nations poetry and power today*, features a number of poems which would never have been intended for the page, written by performance poets like Steven Oliver, but in this collection they convey just as much power as those that were (Whittaker 2020).

The rewards for removing as many barriers as possible for entry into the world of poetry are enormous for establishing a more diverse and representative literary culture in Australia. As the Queensland Poetry Festival's brief for the Emerging Older Poets mentorship reflects, an emerging poet can come from anywhere: at any age, from any background and with any amount of experience. What Merrill and Nozica are doing in this book is mapping the territory and encouraging as many people as possible to take part. The book will serve well as a guide to creative writing teachers as an introduction to the field, how to encourage students to write for a slam, how to organise a slam, and finally, how best to incorporate these lessons into the classroom. Although the aims of slam appear outside of the academy, as more slam poets gain mainstream success, these poets will find themselves brought into the academy. Students will know the work of slam poets once they enter creative writing classes at university and will look for it amongst the poetry they are being taught. It is incumbent upon creative writing academics to expand their reading lists to include poets who compose for the stage as well as the page, and to do so with the rigour and technical focus that both print and performance demand.

Notes

¹ As Fiona Elizabeth Allen Scotney notes, the 'generation of '68' describes an assortment of 'mainly young writers who first came to prominence in the closing years of the 1960s... They rose to public notice on the crest of a wave of poetry readings, 'underground' magazines, and a generally expressed antagonism to the established mainstream of poetry at that time, which they saw as too conservative. The readings attracted a large and varied audience, and the magazines, being cheap and open to almost anything in the way of new poetry, were an ideal breeding ground for ideas, argument and experiment' (2014: x).

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Dominic Symes is a writer living on Kurna Country (Adelaide). His poetry has featured in Australian Poetry Journal, Australian Book Review, Transnational Literature and Award Winning Australian Writing. He curates NO WAVE, a monthly poetry reading series. He was selected for Cordite/Australian Poetry's 'Tell me like you mean it' anthology and appeared at the Emerging Writers Festival in 2020. His reviews and criticism have appeared in Cordite Poetry Review, Axon: Creative Explorations and TEXT Journal. He has recently taken on the role of co-editor for reviews at TEXT Journal.