



The Commonplace Book: A Writers' Journey Through Quotations by Elizabeth Smither. Auckland: AUP (2011). RRP: \$34.99. Pb, 192 pp. ISBN: 9781869404765. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

Elizabeth Smither is a prolific and celebrated poet and fiction writer. In *The Commonplace Book* she brings her broad range of interests and resourcefulness to bear on a lifetime's activities. Her entries in a series of three autobiographical journals were accrued over several years from 1996 to 2009 and encompass quotations, poems, incidents and memories from her life as a writer, poet, novelist, friend and mother. The best of the entries work a thread exploring both the big and unanswerable questions as well as the familiar and everyday ones. These are writings that are in turn funny and serious, revealing a writer who is at ease with herself and her craft.

Many of the pieces in this collection are of a personal nature and pinpoint Smither's awareness of the possibilities of language. Smither divides the book into three parts: The commonplace book of the three fish, The Parisian commonplace book and The Virginia commonplace book. The extract where she is sitting on a bench in Auckland watching the world go by, points to her capacity as observer:

I am sitting on a bench in Queen Street, Auckland, looking at the pedestrians and keeping an eye on a large clock as it inches forward to the time I have an appointment. A disheveled, ragged man, who has probably slept rough, stands in front of me and ask whether, in return for a small coin, he can perform a song of which he knows two verses.

Beyond the pieces about her own life and writing, Smither is less introspective as she gathers her scraps and pieces of information from quotations, poems, extracts and things she has seen and overheard. For instance, in the second commonplace book, she describes a trip to Paris and a flamenco performance:

The young woman, in two flamenco dresses, pink shoes and then black, was magnificent. So fluid in her upper body, carrying the movement from her toes to the tips of her

outflung fingers. The male was magnificent too but very aware of it. His solo should have concluded long before it did.

Smither's entries are not confined to her personal tales of people and events. In her third commonplace book (a Christmas gift from her friend Virginia, after whom it is named), she presents a wonderful description of a "poorly attended poetry festival in Wellington." The event was attended by Sam Hamhill, John F. Denne and Ban'ys Natsuishi, who read from her series of haiku, *The Flying Pope*. Smither gives the following samples of his haiku from "The Flying Pope":

Flying Pope
visible only to children
and a giraffe

The Flying Pope's
best friend: an octopus
at the bottom of the sea

Many of the extracts dealing with personal relationships are inevitably, with poets. "Shall we begin an email correspondence?" she is asked by Ruth Fainlight. She responds with a quote from Jane Kenyon:

"The poet's job is to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in such a beautiful way that people cannot live without it; to put into words those feelings we all have that are so deep, so important and yet so difficult to name."

Other pieces record with gentle, wry humour the domesticity of family life, religion, friendships, memories of conversations and meetings with writers, but she is principally concerned with her own writing life. Smither takes the reader into both her outer and inner worlds; she reveals her hopes and dreams for both herself and her family; she reads us her mail, and talks about films, books, plays and poetry festivals. Here we have an excerpt from her description of a visit to the National Gallery where she views a portrait of Lucrezia Borgia:

I want to absorb the details and take notes of this mysterious painting which is not only richly engaging through its bold use of colour but because of Lucrezia herself who seems to be twitching, almost sneering, but is at the same time immensely likeable. All her human characteristics (including the dagger she clutches – just the pommel is visible in her curled-up fist) are on show.

Journal or commonplace writing is a peculiar genre. Its annals are studded with remarkable practitioners, writers perfectly equipped not only to describe but to instruct. We may well read them to be amused, but we also read them because they tell us the joys and pitfalls of writing and of the day-to-day life. We may find ourselves becoming deeply involved with Smither's musings – engaging with them as a way of writing ourselves.

Whatever the intention of the writer to open herself publically in this book, what's really remarkable is the extraordinary, dazzling, variety of scenes that emerge from it. If anyone ever imagined that keeping a diary, writing notes, or structuring a whole book about one's accomplishments was a simple art, the descriptions here should be enough to disabuse them. This collection remains a testament to the power of the imagination and to the writer's skill.