



*From Under the Overcoat* by Sue Orr.  
Auckland: Random House/Vintage (2011).  
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Reviewed by Isa Moynihan.

Using myth, fairy story and classics from the past has always been a popular source of inspiration for writers and film-makers. Sequels are common, though not always successful; Shakespeare and Jane Austen are regularly tricked out in contemporary dress and manners. Fairy stories and fables are subverted and we have sheep in wolves' clothing, a lovable ogre, and the kissed prince turning into a frog. All very 'in' at the moment, including the promising New Zealand television series featuring Kiwi semidemi-gods and goddesses from Norse mythology.

However, when the idea was, as the writer states, "to identify ten classic short stories and write a modern story in response to each, a story that tipped its hat to the original in some way" we are on less familiar territory. When Sue Orr tells us that her two-fold purpose is "to salute short masterpieces of the past and to encourage readers to seek the stories out and read them", it's beginning to sound like a high school or university assignment.

Orr provides a brief summary of the original works together with an indication of what it was that inspired her to respond to them. Such a response is, of course, personal and shouldn't be condemned if it differs from mine, but I couldn't help feeling that at times the response was too contrived, the marriage between story and theme or image a forced one.

I remember reading *Boule de Suif* as part of a French literature paper at university, but find its link with Orr's *Journeyman* too tenuous to justify choosing it as a basis. The theme of social unease among one's 'betters' comes across so well in Orr's version that the French connection is not only tenuous but completely unnecessary. The story stands on its own as an observation of the subtle Kiwi gradations of living in a purportedly classless society. On the other hand, it might be more interesting to use de Maupassant's characters in a contemporary setting – say a tour bus – in order to illustrate the enormous social changes that

have taken place since 1880, and perhaps some basic human attitudes that have not changed.

In the media release that accompanied the review copy Sue Orr includes further explanations of her methods and purposes in using masterpieces of the past. She may 'echo' them through iconography, as in *The Open Home*, inspired by a friend's experience, and based on the image of a house that can be opened up and its interior life exposed as in Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House*. An interesting idea that hardly needs the KM reference.

She may also echo the classic stories through using a common theme as in *Worms*, based on "the potency of unverifiable rumour", which Orr identifies as one of the two main sources of narrative energy in *The Turn of the Screw*, the other being the framing device, which tightens the suspense. Again, the tale of teenage surfers and beach parties with drugs and alcohol and the inevitable car crash is vivid and authentic and seems to have little or no connection with Henry James's eerie story of evil and the supernatural, the only link being the doubt about what really happened.

In general then, it seems that the idea of using past masterpieces as inspiration hasn't really worked. Surely what made them masterpieces was how they were written, not what they were 'about'. There must be thousands of portraits of women, but there is only one *Mona Lisa*.

Orr insists, quite rightly, that the stories can be enjoyed as modern NZ stories standing on their own. So why bother pinning them to the coat tails of a giant's overcoat? Inspiration or exploitation? Orr explains that the "little signposts, clues, icons, which connect them back to the originals" are for readers looking for something more. And, no doubt, feeling slightly smug when they find them. One reviewer enjoyed identifying such "flickers" and claims to have uncovered references that Orr didn't "admit to", and even conjured up possible sources of inspiration that contemporary NZ writers could well be working on.

At the end of all this I found myself protesting that I didn't want to approach a short story like a truffle-hound snuffing for black or white gold on hidden tree roots.

Sue Orr's first short story collection, *Etiquette for a Dinner Party*, was also published by Vintage in 2008 and won the Lilian Ida Smith Award. Sue is a graduate of the Bill Manhire programme at Victoria University and has worked as a journalist, editor, and speech-writer for Governor-General Dame Silvia Cartwright.