



The Broken Book
by Fiona Farrell.
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1869405765. Reviewed
by Susan Kornfeld.

I am **Fiona Farrell's** age. Although an American, I shared some of her formative experiences in the 60s and 70s. As a Christchurch resident

these past five years, I too experienced the earthquakes. I am a walker. This book was bound to appeal to me. And so it did – though not entirely.

Farrell's *The Broken Book* is a study in contrasts between continuity and rupture, between age and youth. It begins as a book of walking with all the reflections and ruminations that such famous walkers as Rousseau, Belloc, Thoreau, Bill Bryson, Eric Newby, and John Muir have led us to expect. Well, almost. The diversions and delights of the walking essays do not always escape the commonplace. What makes the book figuratively "Broken" are twenty one earthquake-related poems that interrupt the writer's quiet contemplations – with often percussive effects:

Knock / Knock / Knock (4 repetitions of this)
 Oh. / Oh. / Oh.
 BOOM BOOM / ... / BOOM BOOM
 pip // pip // pip
 Biff! // Bang! // All gone!

These lines are taken from different poems, each of which offers a jolt to the flowing prose of the essays. As an example of flowing prose, consider this passage from "A Walk to the Winter Palace," an amble with an unnamed companion through Menton, France (where Farrell once lived as a Mansfield Fellow). Here, Farrell muses on the town's history as a luxurious health destination for the tubercular:

Sanatorium...

It conjures up rows of pale children lying on deckchairs to receive their measure of health-giving sunlight. It conjures up Mimi knocking at the door with her tiny frozen hand. And Hans Castorp beneath his cosy woollen blanket among the pine trees on the magic mountain. It conjures up the laughter of frail youth, dancing.

At her best, Farrell writes with the deft art of the conjurer, at once lyric, keenly observant, and reflective. Without the earthquake, she perhaps would have completed the book as a posy of essays. It would have been a comfortable and enjoyable meander through landscape, history, and memoir, dishing up the occasional anecdote and generous helpings of fact. What this posy of prose might lack would be the sense of purpose or passion – or even self discovery – that drove Thoreau, Bryson, and even Robert Louis Stevenson whose book *Travels with a Donkey* forms the core of Farrell's first piece, "A Walk in the Cévennes."

But Farrell's project was interrupted by the earthquake and the ongoing barrage of aftershocks. She "could see ripples coming across the landscape, then –bang! it would hit. And I'd carry on working... ." She began writing poetry based on earthquake stories and because the two genres were composed together Farrell decided that the book should be read in the way it was written: "Suddenly there's a bang and a little aftershock of a poem and you carry on reading." (Comments taken from an interview, Radio New Zealand, 29 October 2011)

The poems are at first mere tremors in the text but they build to the final essay, "A Walk on Shaky Ground," a chapter on earthquakes which at first employs the same dispassionate tone as the other essays ("There was a bright metallic sheen to the day [September 4], a kind of sequined artificiality. This day could fly apart in an instant. I needed to put all the books back in order ..."), but then as though having gained amplitude, Farrell marshals emotion and it is grief mingled with awe, uncertainty, and outrage. One powerful section visits the devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the aftershocks it delivered to the notion of a benevolent deity. Voltaire's still powerfully resonant "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" is quoted at some length.

The outrage is aimed at the profits and politics surrounding the rebuilding of Christchurch, and Earthquake Minister Gerry Brownlee is in the crosshairs. A scalding "Panegyric" assures us that "he'll have his statue in the Square, / beside the fallen steeple, / beneath the broken stair".

The contrast between continuity and rupture is heightened by two walks in France. Menton, unlike the geologically new islands of New Zealand ("as jumpy as a canoe on a restless ocean"), is "an old place" that has seen "continuous human occupation since rhinos walked the hills."

“A Walk in the Cévennes” also offers images of permanence and solidity – “masonry gripping with bare knuckles at worn stone” – coupled with intrusions from the 21st Century as the walk veers into busy towns. Farrell, now in late middle age, thinks of the abuse Stevenson heaped on his donkey, Modestine, on the same walk some hundred and thirty years ago and recalls her youth in rural Otago, seeing “that agonised eye peering from the press of woolly bodies in the stock truck.” The treatment of livestock segues to her discovery at thirteen of a Holocaust book – a reading that shattered her innocence as deeply as the earthquake shattered her hard-won sense of balance as an older woman. “It tainted everything.”

Much of the autobiographical material here and in other essays will be familiar to those who read her 2004 fictionalised memoir *Book Book*. “A Walk to the Botanic Garden,” which takes place in Dunedin, is almost all memoir. The actual walk she takes with her granddaughter is the flimsiest of pretexts for confronting herself as a young woman at every turn. “For the young woman who was me, life became a barrage of clicks. ... She seemed ... ready to burst into flame at the slightest touch.”

A Preamble (pre-amble, perhaps) and Epilogue bracket the chapters, but they may collectively take up more real estate than they deserve. The notion that “I meant to write a book about walking but then

the earthquake happened” does not really need to be repeated nine times as it is in those sections. Much of the Epilogue really belongs with the final earthquake chapter. Of bittersweet relevance, however, is her introductory comment that walking makes her “feel grounded, steady, balanced on solid earth.” At the end of the book, however, she qualifies that: “I feel as if I am no longer standing on solid ground. ... I am, instead, rattled. Unsteady. Unstable.” In one of the more moving poems, she concludes:

There is no option but
to head straight into
the sun, prodding as
old women do with
their irritable sticks,
feeling for solid spots.

Without the uniqueness of Farrell’s presentation neither poems nor essays would be nearly so compelling. The whole, however, is greater than the sum of its parts. The cumulative effect of broken narrative, of the ruptures between now and then, youth and age, becomes a powerful reminder of our shaky tenure on this planet. In one of the first poems she writes about a child sprawled on the back of a horse beset by flies, “all prick and agitation” until “His skin quivers” and he stamps: “a blue day and you small, / straddled across the back / of a big beast. And / that is how the earth is.”