



Warm Auditorium
by James Brown.
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Reviewed by
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Warm Auditorium
is James Brown's
fifth book of poetry.
His first book, *Go
Round Power Please*,
won the 1996 Jessie
Mackay Best First

Book of Poetry Award, and he has been a finalist in the Montana New Zealand Book Awards three times.

The prolific Brown, whose work has achieved excellence over many years, is at his most diverse in *Warm Auditorium*. Several poems flout convention and Brown's usual humour, verve and experiments with language are electric, ornate, oddly formal at times, and show his fascination with the mechanics of poetry, as the opening lines of first poem, "Work Station" indicate:

If I had a window, I would look out of it.
The sun's reflections on puddle concrete
would brighten my eyes.

Much about Brown's thematic as well as stylistic aims can be seen in this passage. The poems search endlessly for hidden truths, some elusive secret behind the everyday world, one that resists naming in even the most poetic language; it is no coincidence, surely, that poems proceed in a provocative manner. Brown pays less attention to large-scale social issues than to the everyday domestic scene:

It was nearly evening, the sunset's shimmering motif
Perhaps overbearing, as she tilted forward her head
Letting her hair fall clear of her neck's pale bed.
("Bridlington Weekend").

Brilliant, poignant, sometimes surreal images and passages abound: "I glisten to people all day. / Everything they say is true. / By night I am beside myself." ("The Glistener"); "Walking home from school she flits / backwards, dallies sideways. / She stops to gentle seeds and snails, / her brow all over miles and furrows." ("My Oatmeal Granddaughter"). Many of the poems have the same mix of sharp, even dazzling writing. The vocabulary is large ("belligerence" and "defamation" turn up), events and situations are intensely charged, and the voice of the poet is compelling; as we see in Section II in the poem "My Address":

Did you know that introverts salivate more than
extroverts?

I'm not making THAT up.
Does this make introverts sloppy kissers?
NB: shyness is NOT the same as introversion.

A high-tension personality, often ebullient and melancholy at once, pervades many of the poems in this part of the collection. In "The Terrible Truth", for example, the persona attends a group meeting, which the reader assumes is an AA meeting or something similar, only to discover a twist at the end of the poem.

In the extravagant, amusing section entitled Intermission, the poet's dreamlike meditations take him from the everyday moment of receiving a note from a friend to "The Outfield" where

Bread and board and matches.
Cup and plastic spoon.
Luck's enormous catches
stretching
to the moon.

The poems that follow Intermission are lengthier and include a two-page story entitled "My Lost Decade". The poems take a somber turn, remembering fellow footballers. The apparent autobiographicality of these poems is moving.

The confessional passages are complimented well by those in the final section. Brown's bike turns up to offer consolation and connection to the truth, as does the problem of not knowing "where my words come from" in "Truth Notes", which ends with a lovely, tender moment of reconciliation with one's ideas: "I just sat down to write a few notes for my internal exam. / And that's exactly what I'm sorting out." Another fine poem that works towards a lively expression of hard-won success is the rhyming poem "The Tuba Player":

From the rear, a gaudy flarting
and the tuba player's flat feet smarting
behind striding girls and baton flings
and violinists in the spring.

Many of these poems seem occasional – sometimes quite personal, sometimes ruminative, even Wordsworthian in their meditations on what the things of this world might have to teach us; lines like these from the opening of the final poem "Needs Work":

You decide to start again. This time, you listen to
your parents.
No, you don't. You walk into the forest.
This way. Between these trees,
You like to watch people unobserved.

Few books of poems range this widely; the result is something of a miscellany, but one that seldom disappoints and often surprises and rewards.