



The Truth Garden
by Emma Neale.
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Reviewed by
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The fourth winner of the Kathleen Grattan Award for Poetry, *The Truth Garden* is also Dunedin poet and novelist Emma Neale's fourth poetry

collection, made up of forty predominantly free verse lyric poems.

If, like me, you don't find children or poems about children automatically charming, the book's early poems may seem off-putting. But although many poems do feature Neale's children, they aren't about kids so much as Neale's way of examining the world through the lens of fragility that comes with being responsible for another life. A heightened awareness of time – how fleeting it is, how quickly things change, grow, decay, and are lost – is the pulse behind nearly all poems here, explicitly so in Carpe Diem poems like "Satellite", or in poems like "Discontinuous" and "No Time Like the Present", which both play with the idea of being able to somehow save time up, for use at a later date.

A feature of the Kathleen Grattan Award books is the attention paid to their design (in this case by Fiona Moffatt, with illustrations by Kathryn Madill). Which makes it all the stranger that there wasn't more thought

about the effect that page breaks have on the poems. Too many poems start on the recto and finish verso without anything in the layout or last line(s) to indicate that the poem continues overleaf. "Don't Stay Up Late, Love", "Event!", "Brood" and "Heron Blue" are all marred in this way.

Neale also sometimes overloads her images: 'birch trees, song-lilt, star-shot, / sea-sway, eyelash, gumnut,' ("Fall"), 'the daylight-child is all monkey firecracker popcorn slingshot / cap-gun balloon bang star-jump' ("Dormant"), 'he's popcorn shot from hot pan fat, / a circus geezer strapped to his trapeze, / Olympic gymnast in a spritzzy floor-dance, / backwards parachutist who crows ...' ("Open Air Theatre"). One poem ("Girls High") is made of nothing *but* descriptors. Taken individually, it's maybe not so bad. But the overloading recurs often enough to be intrusive, and makes some poems (like "Open Air Theatre") feel drunk on their own cleverness.

But in the best poems, Neale wields her imagery like a scalpel, and is more than willing to shock. One of my favourites, "Satellite", has the young son watching his mother dress. It perfectly presents the double nature of women's bodies in our culture – breasts as sexual as well as functional objects, and sex itself as a natural biological process that results in the conception of children. In "Proposal", Neale confronts the ambivalence of motherhood head-on, and knows exactly when to stop speaking. Then there's "Wrought" – a glorious love poem that begins 'It is as if you are the film / that night draws over each day', and warns us 'these, love, are what the ancient laws / were wrought against'. And how do you go past a poem that begins 'The heart's a bitch' ("Hound")?

Overall, an enjoyable, thought-provoking collection, and a really beautiful book.