



***Flaubert's Drum***  
(2012) by Sugu  
Pillay. Brisbane:  
Interactive Press.  
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Reviewed by Jane  
Orchard.

Sugu Pillay is an acknowledged writer of short fiction and a playwright. Most of the poems in *Flaubert's Drum* have been previously published.

The work is divided into six sections, linked by themes (mainly that of the migrant or 'other' view of New Zealand and the difficulty of transferring meaning through words) and recurring images such as nets, butterflies, stars and the sea. Frequent references to history, myth and art also link the parts.

The first section (nine poems we are asked to read as one long poem) sets the tone for the collection. A highly educated pair of eyes looks at a part of the New Zealand landscape and expresses its reaction through not only Maori myth and legend but also stories and references to people from all times and all places. At least some of them will be unknown to most people.

The title, '*Flaubert's Drum*', refers to a quotation (translated) from Gustav Flaubert: 'Language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we long to move the stars to pity' (*Madame Bovary*, Pt II, Chapter 12). Pillay's rich multiplicity of images and references raises the question of whether she is merely beating the kettle harder and making the stars of meaning more distant as this display of the range of her knowledge occasionally leaves the reader behind. When is rich

too rich? Does the half-comprehending reader reach for Google or ignore the gaps as the nuances of stories, people and places are indicated but elusive?

'In Media Res', part of the 'long poem' of the first section, explains the rationale for the historical references: 'The ancient & the new walk in step/ the past collapsing over the present.' The last two lines echo the quote from Flaubert: '*(articulation is but a plank/ over the abyss)*'. Originally, this was the title poem of the collection.

However, in the second section, in 'Flaubert's Drum':

the world's grammar  
the Rosetta stone

plows wide furrows  
meets with resistance  
may or may not connect  
never certain that it should

each known thing easily  
becomes unknown

Our inability to connect with some of Pillay's references is expected/acceptable.

However, this book is about more than the role of language. It is primarily a new New Zealander's response to us and our place, and our sometimes sad response to her as a migrant.

She certainly loves our landscapes:

*With utmost expedition*  
Mandelstam's *verb* on horseback  
Gallops around the peninsula  
& covertly trafficks with Dante  
*Et in Arcadia ego*

(*Waking up in Stanley Place, Akaroa*)

Pillay is a citizen of the world and New Zealand is just a part of that world. 'The word and the world/ feed on each other' ('Saints and Sinners') to shape her poetry. The collection is a demanding read but it is also one which favours and encourages re-reading to uncover new layers of meaning.