



***Dark Sparring* by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Auckland: AUP (2013). RRP: \$27.99. Pb, 98pp. ISBN: 9781869407865. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Selina Tusitala Marsh lives with her family on Waiheke Island. Her first book, the collection of

poems, *Fast Talking I*, won the NZSA Jessie Mackay Award for the Best First book of Poetry in 2010. Her new collection, *Dark Sparring* is accompanied by a CD of 13 poems read by the poet.

This fine collection compels us to recognize Selina Tusitala Marsh as a poet to be taken seriously. Marsh brings a considerable rage and range of experience to all her writing. In this, her second collection of poems, she uses a variety of forms and techniques. On the back cover, she tells the reader of the way her Tuvaluan relatives came to the house after her mother had died, rolled up the mats and began to dance. The movements of the dance and her exercise in Thai kickboxing taught her new things about rhythm and, ultimately, led to the shape of her poems.

If there is any strand of thinking and meaning that prevails more than any other, it is the musical as well as the personal nature of Marsh's writing. She uses her poems as windows revealing some of the inner life of feeling and insight that we might not otherwise perceive.

Frequently Marsh relies on the cumulative effect of rhythm, repetition and word-play in her poems. Sharp writing and graphic format are also used in her work, as we see in "Chant from Matiatia to Orapiu," which winds along four pages. Other poems rely for their impact on the way they are set out on the page, as we see in "Afakasi Archipelago." One of the more 'formal' poems is "Ha'akula Circle" which has a tight control of line and theme:

A moon smells like a circle
a circle smells like a girl
who smells like a song
which smells like where we once belonged
which smells like Ha'akula
which smells like a father

Here Marsh writes with humour without disguising the complexity or hiding her feelings.

When we come to "NZ, The Lucky Country," we see Marsh at her best; the theme fully developed, a portrait of the country that is sensitive without being sentimental. Quoted are a few lines in which she writes about her attitude to diversity:

Yes, New Zealand's a lucky country
this land, home to migrant tauwi
from 1858 Wellington Gujarati
to Al Wendt's flying fox in a freedom tree
Pule's tapatalk canvassed 10 metres by 3
where 250,000 at Western Springs
drink deep from the well.

In this, one of the longest poems in the collection, Marsh develops the poem with sustained subtlety and allusion.

In some of the poems in the second part of the book, there is a greater variety of style, with effective use of format, repetition and numeration, as we see in "50 Ways to Read a Mother." This is a fine, well-controlled poem divided into 50 sections. Here are parts 1 & 2:

1. Shadow-sipping bed legs dangling
Her 64 years like a petulant six-year-old.
2. Building-block boxed pills
Wait to be swallowed whole, like the truth
Morn, noon, eve.

Many of these poem express concerned sympathy for the down-trodden, deprived, and for those mourning a loved one. Answers are available, part solutions at least to the sense of exclusion. At heart, the answer is often love: love as communication, togetherness and acceptance:

Sometimes every conversation
is like juggling with knives.

Sometimes an answer
is best kept in breath.

These are the good days.

("Penance")

But even more significantly, the 'answer' lies in the processes of observation, understanding and articulation; in the acts of the imagination that result in the poem itself as an expression of connection. As "This is how we are to love" illustrates, the imagination has the power to transcend constraint:

rub the knots of want away
blot her paper skin with a tender
neglect and knead her fingers with yours.

knowing that all along
you just want to hold her hand.



Despite Marsh's interest in the musicality and formatting of her poems, there is no doubt that she remains an image maker. These poems are notably rich in play. Indeed, inventive format, unusual juxtapositions, and fresh attention to language underlie her search for the strange in the familiar, for the new in the ordinary. So in "Fatele," which deals with the pain of losing a loved one, the final part presents a message that is also an imperative for mourners to go on enjoying their lives:

We rose
to the rhythm of the hand-slapped mats
we rose
to the beat of the cabin-bread drum
we rose
and tilted our bodies
to the sun coming through the north-facing window
resting on the Gone-Her.

It is easy to understand this volume. Diverse in its range of reference, so often arresting in its wordplay, the poems are very carefully constructed. Marsh has used her musical skills and variable stanza forms with considerable dexterity. The result is a poetry that is conceived with sharp attention to detail, joy in the possibilities of language, and a devotion to the art of music and poetry. And, not least, love of her family and the grief at the loss of her mother that she is able to express in words and music.
