



The White Clock
 by **Owen Marshall**.
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Reviewed by Jane Orchard.

I came reluctantly to the works of **Owen Marshall**, forced to find writers to teach as our education masters required in the 1980s that kids learn about New Zealand literature

and no other. Marshall was recommended by the HOD as someone the boys might relate to. Girls could relate to most things literary and so were taken for granted.

I read some of Marshall’s short stories, sliced them into teenage-boy slices, analysed them to remove any beauty, and was relieved that, yes, the boys could relate to them. For the next few years I assaulted two different stories with each bunch of disenchanted kids. Thank God for Marshall!

Reading *The White Clock* so many years later, I saw Marshall through new eyes. What a treat it was to read poetry that speaks directly to me, comprehensible, deceptively simple, relevant and multi-layered. The nicely presented volume sits on my bedside table so I can savour mouthful images with my tea each night.

The title poem tells us about the collection. The giant white clock above the town is his *memento mori* – his reminder that death is coming. The clock is his symbol of passing time and the poems reflect on his own life, other lives, other places, and passing time.

This symbol of time takes us on a journey through life and links the poems into a coherent whole. Marshall looks back at his own life and the lives of people he knows in person or from reading. The significance of the insignificant is examined, usually with affection. Memories, for example, of the wonder of his grandchild: ‘You will not remember, so I do for both of us.’

So this is my life, here, now, with worn sneakers and a southerly over the hill. Some of it is fixed and given, more of it I chose. A deal of it lies behind me; some of it – who knows.

“This is My Life”

In the spool that is my life comes this brief check to time, hiatus in which all is caught within a frame that shares with photographs the stabbing sadness of glimpsed transience.

“Freeze Frame”

He looks at the world in “Reverie Cascade”, brief memories of many places both here and overseas. For example, in “Te Kuiti”:

I was born here, learnt to walk here, my mother died here
 And is buried here. Called Home her headstone says, yet
 That should have been with us. I possess no undisputed
 Memories of people, or place, and come in search of them.

Marshall explores people and places, their physical and psychological landscapes, gently, wistfully and usually with reverence but his humour cannot be suppressed. In “Now Departs”, the airport waiting room becomes ‘the feared Limbo of the 21st century,/the place always between, where transit is/perpetually pending, and time loops back upon himself.’ Marshall’s time loop becomes intriguing and fascinating reading we can all relate to. There is little here of the amazing and much of the domestic and everyday.

So to the end of the collection, “Small Child on a Trampoline”. The child is bouncing ‘alone and fearless’ and is ‘transfixed there forever’. The image of her hands ‘outstretched as stars/ against the buttoned white flowers/of the dogwood tree’ is one that makes the moment immortal. Here we come to the memento vivere where life conquers death, the present takes primacy over the past and we can find joy in life and all its tiny details. It must be relished and lived.