



***Astonished Dice,***  
***Collected Short Stories***  
by Geoff Cochrane.  
Wellington: VUP  
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Reviewed by Justin  
Harrison.

Geoff Cochrane's skill with poetry brings an intriguing use of language to his short stories that leaves the reader reeling, blushing,

flipped upside down, and thirsting for more; all at the same time. *Astonished Dice* explores nooks and crannies of the seedier side of life. Battles with alcoholism and efforts to build relationships that struggle to go beyond the sexual are common themes in this collection. Both the subject matter and deft delivery keep the reader off balance yet simultaneously engaged. Many of the stories would be an ideal alternative to a triple shot espresso in the morning for those trying to give up caffeine – it offers an equally big hit to wake you up and engage your neurons.

The vivid descriptions of detox, combined with the author's life-worn features on the back cover, hint at an autobiographical underpinning in several of the stories. This lends further weight to the vivid, often raw, reality portrayed and evident in the short excerpt below from 'Quest Clinic'),

Bede's vision was bled of lustre. He counted his heartbeats. In these present, elastic seconds the gaps in his pulse were stark, a ratchet's missing teeth magnified enormously. While Mrs O unlocked the surgery door with complacency, Bede craved swiftness.

I found myself drawn into the gripping earthiness of the stories, woven in a frugal and unexpected idiom, yet each word chosen exquisitely. This, on occasion, lead me to wonder who is the more messed up, the characters in the story, or me as the reader? An effect, I suspect, the author seeks to accomplish. Thus, the juxtaposition of characters' desperate lifestyles and the unsettling eloquence that portrays them, makes for a riveting blend.

A common saying in theatre is, 'always leave them hungry for more.' Geoff Cochrane, a multi-award winning writer, applies this axiom expertly

to his short stories. He envelops the reader quickly in a web of intrigue, sex, murder or desperation, only to finish at, or even sometimes before the climax. Enthusiasts of 'happily ever after' endings need not bother. But, if you enjoy involving your imagination fully, appreciate a gin-and-tonic (hold the ice) or a bit of musky spice, then this is the very book for you.

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