



***Sleeping on Horseback***  
by Frances Samuel.  
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Reviewed by Sue  
Wootton.

Reading *Sleeping on Horseback* by Frances Samuel<sup>1</sup> is to fall into dreamtime, where time and journey

are simultaneously both ever-present and ever-dissolving. Samuel's collection is a traveller's tale, strangely familiar to all travellers, finding form in the rules of lore, often floating just shy of reality, as if 'running from something / clear and liquid / that flows like a thought / to which your mind keeps returning' ("Customary"). What holds the poems tethered and allows the reader to join the collection's journey is potent and archetypal imagery: horses, elephants, swans, 'ancient birds', the ark, a magic lamp, a genie. Samuel draws a picture of our world which is at once contemporary and millennia-old. The urge to 'draw spires' is innate, she reminds us, as is our common drive to 'ask the pencil' for coherence.

*Sleeping on Horseback* seems at first an entirely abstract collection, set in an imaginative and intellectual mind-space. Its fable-like poems are informed mainly by northern hemisphere culture and traditions. The first stanza of the book's opening poem, "Sleeping on Horseback", for instance, introduces an inn, Po Chu-I (772-846), Mary and Joseph, Hillary and Tenzing, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The poem folds time like a paper fan, pressing old and ancient human stories up against living, breathing now. What makes Po and the others relevant is, as Samuel writes, the fact that 'Everyone is heading towards their personal inns.' These people, then, are among our fellow travellers, even now, even here. "A hundred years are but a moment of sleep," writes Po, still riding.' Samuel never loses sight of this notion. Indeed, the collection's modus operandi might be summed up in lines from "Traveller's luck", the opening poem of the book's second section: 'I watched it all from my glass-bottomed boat / then returned to the marked grave of my own story.'

The "glass-bottomed boat" viewpoint is an apt one. Samuel's work is balanced, slightly distanced, slightly cool. The images float in and out of the frame, and many are surprising, such as the rice grains dispensed by the vending machine in lieu of 'sweet coffee' ("Vending machine"). Lines sturdily built from nouns and verbs rise and fall without splashy distractions in steady, rocking beats: 'Last time we were here: trees / between green and autumn, little birds' ("Marvin's accordion" [sic]). Parts of these poems overlap, but very gently: birds, stars, ducks, elephants, horses, fireworks, leaf-fall and Marvin, for example, pitch up here and there throughout the collection.

In the final section, "Moon walking", the sleepers stir, and intimations of here and now filter through the dreamscape. In the final pages of the collection, with the poem "To the grey morning", a domestic and New Zealand setting emerges: 'the multiple tongues of the flax bush / lashed the bedroom window.' These final poems mark the return, as promised, from civilisation's perpetual themes and stories to 'the marked grave' of a more personal narrative. A journey made by an ancestor from Wales to the West Coast of New Zealand seals the loop between the old fables and the new ones: 'Aunt Tot strangling the chickens, autistic Aunt Madge / Uncle Stan and Dougie gone to war, / illegitimate twins Roland and Rodney, Aunt Win the milliner, / Jesse caught by TB at 17, skeletal Uncle Pat - ' ("The Gardener").

Frances Samuel's poetry has been previously published in mainly Wellington-based literary journals. *Sleeping on Horseback*, her first collection, is the well-wrought work of a poet in full possession of her craft.

1 Frances Samuel is a Wellington poet whose poems have previously appeared in *Sport*, *Turbine*, *Hue & Cry*, *Snorkel*, *Staple* and *Great Sporting Moments*.