

*A Forest On Many Stems*, ed. Laynie Browne (Nightboat Books)

This massive book (580 pages) is a collection of 'essays on the poet's novel', which takes a look at contemporaneous and (mostly 20th Century) historical prose works written by poets. Most are written by poets, so we have an anthology of poet's critical prose about other poets' fiction.

I can't pretend I know all of the critics or the authors and texts under discussion; even the many names I do know, I often haven't read the works being considered. Yet these essays are open, inclusive and discursive enough to not only encourage me to find and read many of these works, but also to offer themselves as both experimental writing and as informed and more generalised contextualisation and discussion.

That is these essays are informed by and embedded within a sense of poetry and its playfulness, liquidity and experiment, with a particular focus on the works poets have chosen to produce as 'novels'. Not prose poetry, but novels: fictional prose, although the book starts with a brief section on the 'Verse Novel' where texts by Lyn Hejinian, Anne Carson and Alice Notley are discussed and the fourth section includes 'Prose Poem' as part of its more elongated title.

Others of the seven sections are more intriguing and open to interpretation: 'Genre Mash-Ups', considers work by Barbara Guest, Gwendolyn Brooks and Gertrude Stein and others; 'Metamorphic / Distance / Aural Address / Wandering' could perhaps include anything, but its selection of author subjects includes Sebald, Pessoa, Lewis Carroll and Leslie Scalapino; whilst Langston Hughes, Michael Ondaatje and Keith Waldrop are amongst those who feature in 'Portrait / Documentary / Representation / Palimpsest'.

Some questions re-occur – usually with different answers. Why would a poet adopt prose? How does prose differ from poetry? ('Why does a poet choose another language to write a novel?' asks Vincent Broqua.) Do we read poets' novels with different expectations? What about narrative, authenticity, plot and momentum? Interiority and lyricism? And what genre is the poet's novel?

Abigail Lang, writing about 'Jacques Roubaud's poets' prose, gets to the heart of the matter for me, suggesting that '[i]f poetry and prose are maintained as distinct, they can enter into a productive conversation'. Whether engaged in close reading, philosophical discussion, literary discourse or theoretical deconstruction, this book articulates and extends that conversation. It is a challenging, focussed and exciting read.

Rupert Loydell