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Diamonds in the manure

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Part poet, part anthropologist, he shows us the strangeness of even the most ordinary things

Muck

By Craig Sherborne

Black Inc, 195pp, $27.95

READING Craig Sherborne is an intense experience. His writing mixes pain and laughter, farce and tragedy. It skips from heartbreaking to ludicrous in a moment. It anatomises characters with almost indecent candor while showing a profound sensitivity to human distress.

And in doing so, it demonstrates that Sherborne has an extraordinary eye for the damage, trivial and profound, that humans inflict on one another, that he is a great contemporary satirist and that he has a genius for the telling detail.

He is, in short, a master stylist. What's more, he is so across diverse modes. As well as his brilliant memoirs, he has written prose and verse drama, lyric poetry and journalism (his day job is as a senior writer for Melbourne's Herald-Sun).

Dramatisation is his first gift. Sherborne's early works were dramatic: plays and radio plays. His early poetry, found in Bullion (Penguin, 1995), also shows a predilection for dramatisation. This is seen in numerous lyric portraits, such as those of the mentally disabled Yvonne in Writing Yvonne and Goodnight Yvonne; the unnamed mastectomy patient of Showing; the dementia sufferer Charles Wyllie, in Sleeptalker and Wyllie; and the old, dying hospitalised woman, and her visiting husband, in A Cortisone of Water.

The dramatising habit remains in his later and more overtly autobiographical poetry, found in the brilliant Necessary Evil (Black Inc, 2006), which includes portraits of a country widower who wears his dead wife's clothes; the dero with yellow fingers; and the narrator of Collett's Store, who seems first to be a lover and then to be a stalker.

Poetry and dramatisation come together in the verse drama Look at Everything Twice, For Me (Currency Press, 1999), in which a woman who has had a heart transplant desires to know the identity of the organ donor. Knowledge, as ever in Sherborne's work, turns out to have ambiguous effects.

It is significant that these characters are damaged. Even in his more lyrical moments -- for
Sherborne is also a poet of observation -- life's damaging condition is observable: the goat in Lil's Funeral "walking the zero of grass it feasted on"; the drowned boy whose "purple mouth was like an eye ripped out"; or the ageing couple who "sit round the TV's flickering fire/like hobos of their own home".

And damage is central to Sherborne's memoirs, Hoi Polloi (Black Inc, 2005) and now Muck.

Hoi Polloi brought Sherborne much attention, justified rave reviews and a cover blurb from influential critic Peter Craven describing it as "one of the great Australian memoirs".

The early reviews of Muck, which is part two of a planned trilogy, have been equally enthusiastic, and its cover blurb -- "a masterpiece" -- is from celebrated philosopher-writer Raimond Gaita. Craven and Gaita are right. Sherborne's intervention in Australian autobiography immediately places him in the company of writers such as Hal Porter and Clive James. As with Hoi Polloi, Muck is an instant classic.

The brilliance of these works stems partly from Sherborne's dramatising skills and theatrical background: he thinks in terms of scenes, conflicts and sharply delineated characterisation. In both works, as well as in much of Necessary Evil, he turns his dramatising habit towards the self and the self's crucible: the family. The smallness of the family -- a boy, a mother and a father -- only adds to the theatrical sense.

Both memoirs focus almost entirely on this ensemble -- intense, insular, dysfunctional -- making them forceful chamber pieces. Hoi Polloi deals with Sherborne's childhood, beginning memorably in his parents' hotel (not a pub, as his class-conscious mother insists) in rural 1960s New Zealand. After moving to Sydney, his parents become associated with the horseracing world, the narrator (never named) attends a private school in which he cannot socially compete and he has various sexual adventures.

Muck is even more focused; set in about 1977, with the narrator in his mid-teens. His father and mother -- Winks and Heels in Hoi Polloi -- have been renamed the Duke and Feet, in line with the family's new purchase, a property in New Zealand where they spend holidays. Part horse property and part dairy farm, the property represents the father's legacy for his son:

A father wants to create an estate and know that when he dies his son will have that same land under his feet ... A dynasty will be born, from father to son, and son on to son and on it goes. A dynasty. Just like the families at that school I go to in Sydney ...

The name of the property, Tudor Park, not only illustrates the parents' social pretensions, but is also ironic, given the Tudors weren't so flash at producing male heirs.

As in Hoi Polloi the narrator is as much a source of satire as are his parents, since he is complicit in their fantasy, as well as harbouring a few of his own. There is comedy in the gap between the teenager's sense of himself and his actual place in the world. His attempt to lord
it over his father's employees is as unsuccessful as his attempt to impress women at the races (though less risible than his father's insistence on introducing his son to the prime minister when he spies ``that tall fellow'', Malcolm Fraser, at the track).

In both memoirs, the importance of class is signalled in the title. But where Hoi Polloi suggested comic misunderstanding -- Heels used it to mean the well-to-do, and added a redundant definite article -- Muck is less ambiguous, as even pretending to be landed gentry is associated with muck: mud, manure, dead animals, blood.

Everything representing class at Tudor Park -- the property, the livestock -- either is muck or comes from muck. No ashes and dust here. Everything inhabits a world of muck, and returns to a world of muck. This is seen in Sherborne's startling descriptions of breaking horses, milking cows and feeding calves. (It's worth remembering that he is not only the author of many powerful anti-pastoral poems, but is a former grains editor of Stock&Land magazine). Writing of milking, he powerfully evokes the grotesqueness of farming. The cows are:

... patients having their bodies drained like an illness. Those hairy, scabby udders between their legs. Men's genitals of sorts -- a scrotum and four fat penises. They have penis tails where their real tails were lopped.

These deformed beasts are associated with the adolescent narrator's unease about human bodies, especially his own. Shaving, he thinks of his nose as ``that bulbous thing'' and he wants to ``rip the ears off my head with the razor''. His one source of joy is his voice: he can sing. But this, too, brings unease, given the quasi-sexual desire of his mother for him to sing to her like a crooner (the narrator having a skill in mimicking older popular singers), and in the fact that a music teacher responds to his vocal impersonations by saying, ``You have no you ... Who are you?"

Not surprisingly, when it comes to sex, bodies are again disconcerting. The narrator, as established in Hoi Polloi, has had a sexual encounter with a middle-aged woman, and his attraction to older women is based on what he sees as the ``safe-signs'' of ageing:

... webs of eye wrinkles and shoulders sun-freckled, cleavage cracked with ageing ... Arms hanging off the bone.

And if this seems like misogyny in the adolescent narrator, it may be part of a larger misanthropy, one directed especially at the older married men at the races who leer and paw at the ``girlies".

Bodies, then, are disturbing things and the bodies of farm animals, grotesquely associated with human sexuality, are also sites of conflict over human power, especially between the narrator and various workers: Churchill, the horse breaker; Norman and his son, the milkers; and Doc, the local vet. The muck of the title, it seems, could also be the narrator, the unnamed Lord Muck, whose delusions of grandeur reach a comic climax when he decides
that when he inherits Tudor Park the Queen should visit so that ``she can sing God save me''.

But, as he is learning, delusions of grandeur are short-lived and the world of human encounters is marked by mutability:

... men's allegiances can last only seconds. Men fall out with each other. They get back on side. They fall out. Go back to firm as friends.

The world is disconcertingly untrustworthy. For the narrator's mother, other humans are similarly difficult to deal with. Some of the book's most acerbic comedy comes from the social embarrassment she engenders in her attempts to receive from others what she believes is her due.

Sherborne's dramatic skills, however, shouldn't blind us to his lyrical ones. Part poet, part anthropologist, he shows us the strangeness of even the most ordinary things. The process of men shaking hands at the races becomes ``a welcome dance where men exchange partners with each other''. Similarly, the opening poem of Necessary Evil, A Racing Life, figures the exchanges between bookies and the poet's father as a kind of ritual. The bookmakers flashed the badge of their stomachs

at my father, fist on hips, parting

the curtain of their suit-coats.

He flashed his stomach back,

took off his porkpie hat to lick

his thumb across its feather.

Here Sherborne characteristically shows us the difference between insiders and outsiders, and uses detail to show the oddity of people's lives. But his defamiliarising is not solely a quality of poetry. In Muck he uses portmanteau words (such as suit-coats in A Racing Life) to give the exact quality of strangeness about the world: fear-snorting, child-girlie, younger-old, sex-watching, safe-sign, men-tide, welcome-dance. Such neologisms illustrate how important detail is to Sherborne. Detail is almost always superabundant with meaning.

Such superabundance is seen in the vignettes he relates, such as practising as a child to be a pickpocket in Suburban Confidential, from Necessary Evil. The child's desire to pry unnoticed is akin to the older poet's act of writing poetry that lays bare the private things found in the parents' drawers: ``a book of sex acts called Danish Passions,/an open pack of condoms". 
The link between observation and sexuality is reinforced in Muck, in which the narrator discovers what eyes are for:

Eyes aren't just for looking, for reaching a destination in a room without tripping or falling, banging into chairs. Eyes are for finding the body parts you want to watch on others. The sex-watching of breast, legs, buttocks, groin, lips, fingers.

In Necessary Evil, the portraits of the parents' decline climaxes in the brilliant elegy for the poet's father, Ash Saturday. In Muck the emphasis on bodies, sexuality and muck also leads to death. The climax, a three-part meditation on death, is breathtaking in its execution.

Indeed, breath is brilliantly used as a motif for the narrator's initiation into the ways of killing and fear of mortality. Farm-death is linked with the narrator's father having a brush with death. In true Sherborne style this leads to some of the book's most hilarious comedy.

Though I compared him with James earlier, Sherborne the memoirist seems closer in spirit to Gustave Flaubert, the great French prose stylist who so hated provincial bourgeois hypocrisy. In his pitiless, exact prose, Sherborne is Flaubertian in his approach, showing life as both grotesque and tragic. But he is not simply a modern, antipodean Flaubertian; he is an original, as funny and as heartbreaking as his characters. Sherborne might sing like a crooner, but his words aren't always sweet.
Diamonds in the Rough is the second studio album by American country-folk singer-songwriter John Prine, released in 1972. Diamonds in the Rough was recorded at Atlantic Recording Studios in New York City. The album's sound homed in on the Appalachian "high lonesome" influences evident on Prine's eponymous debut LP and its bluegrass instrumentation reflects Prine's fascination with early American folk and country music. The album was produced by Arif Mardin and features Prine's brother Dave on dobro.