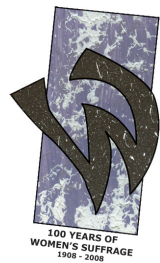


Jenny Strauss



100
YEARS OF WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE
1908-2008



Reflection and Celebration





Jenny Strauss



Limited edition handmade publication 2007

Printed and Handbound

RMIT University Students from School of Architecture and Design
& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

Lecturer/Project Manager: Fern Smith

Facilitation: Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan

Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Jenny Strauss

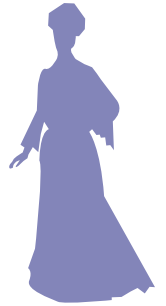
Interviewed by: Emma Brelsford and Cara Jeffrey

Designed By: Sarah Costanzo

Interview of Jenny Strauss edited by Emma Brelsford

Copyright 2007

Jenny Strauss



I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality

Sarah Costanzo



Introduction

The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007

Jenny Strauss



Jenny Strauss on poetry, women and literature.....

It was great because Peter Rose who was at Oxford University came in and asked if I would be interested in editing this anthology, and he said of course you do know what is said about Australian love poems – that you can write the number of Australian love poems on a postage stamp! So I said yes. The idea was to go right back to the earliest poetry. It was interesting and I did get an Australian Research Council grant to do it, which meant that I was able to go to libraries and just read steadily through all the shelves of poetry.

One of the few rules I had was that I said I'm not having any misogynist poetry...and it's a bit odd because there's no poem by Les Murray included and while I tried to address this in the introduction by saying 'Of course there are wonderful poets but they don't all happen to write love poetry' - every god damn reviewer had to comment on the fact that Les wasn't in it! He sent me the strangest letter asking why I hadn't chosen 'Aphrodite Street'. Well I didn't choose 'Aphrodite Street' because it didn't meet my criteria. However when I edited the anthology 'Family Ties' I was able to put poems by Les in it so that made up for it so to speak. There are anti-marriage poems in the book. What people forget is that there were almost as many anti-marriage poems written by women poets as there are anti-marriage poems written by men, but somehow with anthologies it's only the anti-marriage poems by men which get in. The perception is still



Jenny Strauss

that men view marriage as a trap, that it is the women who snare the men into it.

The anti-marriage poems are a genre - just like the pro-marriage ones that women write about how lovely marriage is, and to be frisking around the house making cakes and tarts. When someone like Gilmore writes both kinds you begin to realise what's going on, that it's not just from the heart these poems are speaking, but again I think it's much more likely that women's poems will be read autobiographically because they're not meant to be sufficiently intelligent or skilled to 'do' literature except the literature of sincerity (and sentimentality).

“You talked about a shift in the way women are represented in Australian literature and what that means for the struggle for equality, but I think I'm most interested in the way that women represent themselves”

I would say on the whole the representation of women in literature and probably to some extent in films by men has certainly been influenced by feminism. I guess there was a big shift that came in the 70's and 80's to do with how women represented themselves. There were a couple of poems in 'love poems' that seemed to me to be

Jenny Strauss



really representative. One is a Gilmore poem, a very beautiful poem called 'Eve Song' and the other is one by Chris Mansell called 'Breakfast', which is a set of instructions for a lover, full of things a woman probably would never have said about men before the 1970's and there's a very strong claim to be self-defining, not to be defined by men, and that may mean a sort of loosening of societal ties. This is what people are afraid of when they think of exercise of power on the part of a woman. From this it's become really interesting to me how the term 'family' is coming back. It is really strong at the moment and back in fashion in society but it seems to me that people have forgotten the kind of negative view of the family in a poet like Gillian Hanscombe, a very definitely feminist poet.

"Do you mind if I talk about poetry all the time? I talk about poetry most of the time"

There is this tremendous sense in the 70's of a kind of release of female energy which is of course attractive but it's also scary if it comes from people about whom you feel it's not their prerogative to have energy, or if you might be threatened by this out break of energy. So this shift in the self perception of women seems to me to have been extraordinary and probably started in the 60's when a lot of us first read Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' which was closely followed in influence by Germaine



Jenny Strauss

Greer's 'The Female Eunuch' and Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'. They're the kind of trio of those seminal books. They're interesting because 'The Feminine Mystique' and 'The Second Sex' are struggling I think with the sort of thing that Gilmore is struggling with in 'Eve Song' – the sense of women wanting to be in relations with men but feeling the relations are going wrong or that they have been crippled by them somehow or other.

Then, if you start with the epics and tragedies, the 'big' literary forms, the centre of consciousness is nearly always male. The dominant voices are male and this both rises from and reinforces a culture in which these are felt to be the most important people. Women in revising these myths by simply writing a poem like Chris Mansell's are rejecting this. They are saying, "We'll tell you what it is for us, not what you tell us we ought to be feeling or thinking. This is the way it is". Now, going along with that is also the important thing of woman as the protagonist, as active. You know the famous dichotomy of men and women: man does, woman is –the great contrast between action and being.

"Speak quietly and don't let anyone think that you might carry a big stick"

Jenny Strauss



Then there were those who thought how wonderful Judith Wright was when she was being womanly, writing poetry about making a baby for example, but then when she is horrified by the Hiroshima Bomb and wants to venture into politics she becomes, in Vincent Buckley's infamous dictum, a bit of a shrew, the worst possible thing that a woman can be. What did they think for instance of someone like Jonathan Swift? Is it alright for a man to be virulent and vehement but not for a woman? Are we forever obliged to conform to that very potent line in *Lear*; 'Her voice was ever gentle, soft and low, an excellent thing in woman'. Must it be a case of speak quietly and don't let anyone think that you might carry a big stick?

If you go back to post World War 2, suddenly there was a new crop of women voices claiming the right to talk about all sorts of things. It's not as if women hadn't done this before. And there are a number of novels in which a woman's right to vote came into question, and to take Gilmore again, she writes about whatever she wants to write about. It's astonishing, the range of her writing which is pretty much neglected, which was one reason I wanted to edit her. I mean it's almost distressing to see her in the 1920's and 30's writing poems about the loss of species in Australia through farming methods, and protesting at the treatment of the Aborigines. It's as if in the 1930's so much was going on that seemed to somehow disappear and then come back now. It's as if we keep inventing the ideological wheel.



Jenny Strauss

Moreover there was this sense that if you were a woman who wanted to belong to the intellectual world then you would have to give up your sexuality. And indeed when I went to University a long time ago in 1951, it was noticeable that the women who had academic jobs there were all in fact spinsters except for one or two. I was probably the first generation of female academics that said 'No, this isn't on' and I certainly encountered hostility, not while I was starting as a young unmarried woman but when I was pregnant and said 'No, I'm not stopping working, why should I stop working?' I was reduced in the end to saying to someone: 'Look, if the students are 18 and haven't yet seen a heavily pregnant woman, it's time they did'. But I was a bit naïve in the sense that I thought this is the way everyone is going to go – and it's not true because it's very hard, and I was lucky to have 3 children splendidly born in November and December and breast fed through the long University vacation, but not every woman's biology is as obliging as that, and there were catches to it. I mean one of the problems for instance, was that I couldn't come to a staff developmental meeting because I had to pick up my children from school and it wasn't announced until that day that there was going to be a meeting at 4 o'clock. I might be approved of as a mother, but not as an academic.

But in fact there was a male in my department who had the worst of both worlds, because he was actually someone who was a bit unusual at that stage and he was doubly

Jenny Strauss



disapproved of for not coming to the meeting for the same reason: he had to pick the kids up. It was clear that the men felt rather nervously that he was letting the side down, he was being unmanly and what's more if he was doing this, then they might be expected to too.

“It’s just that my husband managed to change three nappies in his life. And they all fell off.”

So it’s complicated and I think there were a lot of pluses and some minuses in the sexual revolution. I mean there is liberation but there is also pressure. I’m not sure that sado-masochism is really feminist freedom at all. I’m an old fashioned leftie, that’s my trouble you see, but I think also that with taking the power to control our sexuality, as well as taking the power to act on our own behalf, there has been a very strong move toward individuality, or individualism. With this has come the argument that second wave feminism too often perceived women as victims. And young women very understandably got a bit impatient with this. ‘Oh god! There are our mother’s whinging again!’ And also quite frankly, it’s frightening to think that you may live in a world that is going to turn you into a victim. There is a natural resistance. You are not going to embrace victimhood, you would prefer not to imagine that it could happen to you. And out of that comes a risk that you simply ignore and therefore don’t fix the systemic dis-



Jenny Strauss

crimination against women. I mean the fact of the matter is most victims of domestic violence are women, however every now and then you get this pathetic paper or letter in the newspaper saying 'Oh my wife beat me up with the saucepan' . . .

Power is both physical and financial. And most of the poor are women and among that group, there are lots of single mothers, who frequently get beaten up emotionally for their dependence on welfare. So the wonderful value we put on motherhood only operates in the cases when it's safely within the sanctity of male protections. Most of the rich and powerful, quite frankly, are men. People jump up and down and get terribly excited because one woman has entered the realms of the 10 richest people in the world, well stuff that. There's a tendency often from people of good will to think this is sad, but normal, and perhaps the hardest thing of all is to shift what is seen as normal. The powerful also have the access to media etc which defines normality for us. So, while I think that personal liberation for women has been terribly important and it certainly changed a lot in the circumstances of women's lives, I think that there is still a lot to be done about women in the public domain.

"I didn't feel discriminated against in my childhood but there is reason to think that this was because I had a very supportive father, so my experience of a male parent was a very nurturing one"

Jenny Strauss



Also, I went to a girls' boarding school where the power models that you saw were women – for better and for worse – and when I went to University it was to an Arts faculty, which is the one to go to as a woman if you want to feel at home instead of feeling like a fish out of water. So I never really felt at that stage any obstacles in my life because I was a woman. I keep thinking of those first women who went into medical faculties or engineering faculties and they would have had a rough time indeed.

One thing I dislike is the insistence by many successful women that they did it all by their own individual effort. People who will never conceive of any form of luck in their achievements seem to me to be totally discounting reality. I believe that I had an enormous amount of luck, simply for instance in when I happened to be born, for example I was lucky to be around when Menzies introduced the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, which entitled me to go to the university, something I would never have been able to otherwise. I was lucky in marriage too. Maybe it was partly good management but also an element of good luck since in this world where we don't have arranged marriages I happened to meet a man who thought it was a good idea to have a wife who had a career as well. This was certainly one reason that I didn't re-marry when the person who might have been a possible candidate said happily 'Well of course when we marry you wont want to work will you?' and I thought 'Oh no, there's a case of mistaken identity here!'



Final Notes

Associate Professor Jenny Strauss is a poet, critic and teacher at Monash University. In 2007 she was awarded Member of the Order of Australia for her service to education as an academic and scholar in the field of Australian literature and poetry. A brief sample of Jenny's interests includes women's issues and industrial relations politics. Jenny Strauss most recently published 'Judith Wright – A tribute' in *Austral-Asia encounters: From Literature and Women's studies to Politics and Tourism*.



