

Savouring the best of Brockwell

POETRY

EARTH GIRLS. By Lisa Brockwell.
Pitt Street Poetry. \$25.

Reviewer: **GEOFF PAGE**

Although Lisa Brockwell was born in Sydney she has spent considerable time in England and now lives in the Byron Bay hinterland. In recent years she has had poems shortlisted for seven major poetry prizes and has been included in *The Best Australian Poems* for 2014 and 2015. Her first book, *Earth Girls*, is thus a welcome opportunity to savour the best of her work and consider it as a whole.



As with most first collections, there is a predictable variety, a sense of different directions that might be taken in the future. One element encountered frequently, however, is a complex feminism in which the female protagonist or narrator is shown as vulnerable and exposed yet also on her way to self-confidence. Many of the poems are distinguished by a dramatic context and a narrative thrust.

A poem melding all these elements is Brockwell's *Waiting on Imran Khan*. Its opening lines establish the scene: "I knew they were trouble the moment they walked in. / I was eighteen, bookish. I'd not yet learned / to build a public face." As a hapless waitress the narrator becomes, under their misogynist pressure, "a boy's own way to rejig / the middle order of the Pakistani cricket team / ... Imran Khan sat / at the centre ... I met his eye for a long moment // saw carefully manicured disgust / at the humiliation I was heaping on myself ..." It's not a moment most women would want to remember, let alone write about, but the strength

of the poem's ending is nevertheless a characteristically compelling answer: "Yes, / I was walking the floor; earning my own money, slowly / forming the dense quartz of my opinions, polished and patient."

This particular conclusion is just one of many showing how forcefully Brockwell can tie up a poem in its last two or three lines. *Echidna*, for instance, starts with a whimsical comparison between the prickly animal and a motorcyclist ("leather jacket, spiked hair") and finishes, just a few lines later, with: "You get on with your business / around the rubbish and gravel, / too shy to chat and too tough to run". The echidna has, it would seem, the resilience to confront the Pakistani cricket team, if necessary.

Wit of this order is seen in a number of the poems in *Earth Girls* but so too is a lyrical density, a love of language for its own sake. Something of this can be sensed in Brockwell's ekphrastic sequence, *Point of View*, based on an exhibition of Philip Wolfhagen's paintings. It's as if she's trying to find a linguistic equivalent to the texture of the paint itself. "Up close, / the waves are layers of beeswax and paint built / into a third dimension. When I step back I catch / something moving across the face of the water." ("Surface Tension")

More typical though are the last lines of Brockwell's sonnet, *Eden*, which lovingly returns to her own brand of feminism: "Woman at rest, / man baking apple pie, woman is blessed. / I watch, book in hand, my own tools downed, / your labour the gift, to my oyster, of sand. / This is our dominion, we have been restored / to that cumbersome garden, rich and flawed".

It's a snappy twist on the Adam and Eve story which lies, for better or worse, at the base of so much of our culture. Again, we see Brockwell's skill at addressing serious issues in an engagingly light-hearted way. *Earth Girls* is yet another highly accomplished debut by an Australian female poet. And, not unimportantly, it's also been produced with suitably high design and production values.

• Geoff Page is a Canberra poet and reviewer.



Complex feminism features heavily in Lisa Brockwell's first collection.

'Everything is the same, just worse'

ARAB AND JEW: WOUNDED SPIRITS IN A PROMISED

LAND. By David Shipler.
Broadway Books. \$39.95.

Reviewer: **T.H. SEAL**

David Shipler has now expanded, revised and updated what was already the most considered and compassionate account in print of how Israelis and Palestinians (Arabs and Jews, as Shipler more contentiously puts it) think about each other, their shared pasts and their unclear future apart and together. *Arab and Jew* was published in 1986, revised in 2002, and now worked over once more. Shipler has decided to eschew the pessimistic advice of an Israeli friend, who recommended that he "simply insert a sentence at the beginning: Everything is the same, just worse".

I first met David Shipler during the five years when he served as bureau chief for *The New York Times* in Jerusalem. I value him as a friend, and greatly respect the integrity, the meticulously honest and accurate research, the moral force and drive in argument which he has brought to all his books, and now to his blog as well. Even, however, those who have never met Shipler should

find *Arab and Jew* a remarkably cogent, hard-headed, clear-eyed assessment of the Middle East dispute.

What they will find first of all is evidence of a first-rate reporter in action, sifting and checking evidence meticulously, fairly ensuring that all voices are listened to, not taking anything on trust, analysing the context and the connotations of everything said to him. Those with no interest in the Middle East could still profit from scrutinising a master-writer at work.

Shipler's own voice (a shrewd, fair, demanding one) sets the tone for *Arab and Jew*, but the book is also jam-packed with a cacophony of other speakers and a miscellany of other characters. Shipler instructs by illuminating, shining light on one prejudice or article of faith after another, alternating between Israelis and Palestinians, trying to find common threads even if not common ground. Voices often relegated to the chorus are given their due. Shipler is a first-rate listener, and approaches his task with an ostensibly modest aim: "not to find the right answers but to ask the right questions".



Those questions pertain to history, geography, sociology, psephology, politics, but most especially psychology. Shipler's focus throughout is on attitudes, images and stereotypes, particularly on the way they have "insinuated like indelible stains" into people's most intimate thoughts and sentiments. That thinking and feeling is laid out, one bit after another, or one on top of another, or one confronting the other. The net effect is not a collage or a pastiche but a fully formed palimpsest.

Other books tell us different things we need to know about Israelis and Palestinians. Lawrence Wright's *13 Days in September* provides a quite gripping rerun of the Camp David negotiations. Aaron Miller claimed the best title for a book on the Middle East dispute, with his *The Much Too Promised Land*. Amos Oz's *To Know a Woman* would break anyone's heart, and confirm the injustice in Oz's not yet having been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Raja Shehadeh (one of the voices in Shipler's book) writes poignantly about Palestinian trails and traces in the land. All those books evince two defining traits which Shipler identifies, "a continuity of calloused wisdom" and "a hardness to the dreams". There is hardness in Shipler's writing too, but only the hardness which comes with doggedly seeking clarity, perspective and insight.