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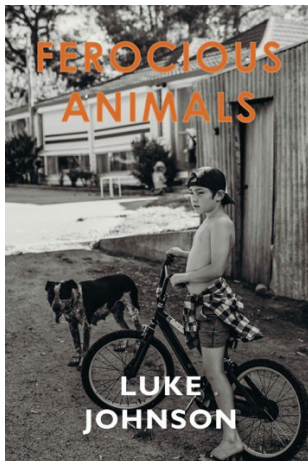
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TEXT review

A thing or two about collisions

review by Shannon Sandford



Luke Johnson

Ferocious Animals

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2021

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After their train comes to an unexpected and screeching halt, a man and woman trade theories about the cause of the commotion. When the man asks if she thinks they might have hit something, the woman mocks him, ‘*Maybe* we hit something, he says. *Ha!* I thought you were supposed to know a thing or two about collisions’ (p. 18).

Luke Johnson’s debut collection, *Ferocious Animals*, explores Australia and Australian national identity in all of its complexities and contradictions. It comprises thirteen short

stories that embroil deeply flawed characters in tragic circumstances of loss and grief, sexual violence, neglect, abuse and infidelity while offering rare glimpses of compassion and tenderness. Through narration that activates the vulnerabilities of childhood, the turbulence of adolescence, and the dysfunction of adulthood, Johnson weaves compelling stories that explore innocence, indecency, and the generative spaces between, in prose that is equal parts delicate and brutal. At its heart, *Ferocious Animals* is a collection compiled under a framework of collisions, where the bright euphoria of human joy, connection, and intimacy meets and intersects with darker revelations of what horrors humans can inflict on one another.

This collection reflects and responds to a robust tendency in contemporary Australian short fiction to explore the intricacies of the human condition through multiple angles and perspectives. Murray Middleton's *When There's Nowhere Else to Run* (2016), captures the humanity in desperation through a range of voices and characters who seek refuge, seclusion, and vindication from past discretions. *Jungle Without Water and Other Stories* (2017) by Sreedhevi Iyer delves into the shifting boundaries of belonging, suspicion, and apathy that dictate lived experience of diaspora in Australia. Mihaela Nicolescu and Nadine Browne's combined anthology *The Whip Hand* (2016) illuminates the complexities of the everyday through characters living on the outermost edges of society and in precarious states of deep loneliness and despair. These collections represent only a small fraction of the recent groundswell of confident and refined short-form fiction that sit somewhat uncomfortably between the familiar and foreign to deliver startling home truths.

Like these authors, Johnson works at the liminal edges of place and time, deploying characters with varying motivations and aspirations and, ultimately, revealing what lurks beneath the artifice of our humanity. *Ferocious Animals* plays with notions of optimism and morality commonly associated with its primary setting in quasi-outback suburbia while centring complex, contradictory, and fascinating characters who prove the antithesis of these ideals. The title is an apt precursor to stories which extol civility and care alongside depravity and ruthlessness as twinned aspects of human/nature. The story 'The Names of Dead Horses' (quoted above) signals the rich, complex meaning to be pulled from this finely crafted prose, as the inciting incident gives way to explorations of deep histories and past ghosts that collide with contemporary presumptions of masculinity. Collision denotes a productive lens for the themes and style in this collection – a lens that encompasses not only juxtaposition or contrast but offers wider scope for examining the constellation of contexts, characters and scenes that interact and intersect, merge and overlay, under Johnson's skilled hand.

Regional Australia – as a site and a symbol of Australiana – is a powerful backdrop for stories that emphasise the core ideological and cultural forces of our nation. Quotidian scenes depicting local footy rivalries, family camping trips, schoolyard antics, farm life, and fishing expeditions strike strong associations with small-town Australia that shapes and is shaped by long-established traditions and histories. The story, 'Bass Minx', for example, effectively amplifies certain connotations of the pub in its portrayal of the local nightlife from the

perspective of Kat, an almost-broke cashier struggling to move on from an abusive relationship:

There are five pubs in this shit town. Three of them are shit and two of them are okay but still pretty shit depending on how many people are there. The one they're going to is located at the bottom end of the main street, opposite Video Ezy. It's called the Colonial and has a picture of a windmill on it. It didn't used to cost anything to get in on a Saturday night, but since everyone started going to the Stacey first and then showing up to the Colonial afterwards, it now costs five bucks to get in if you arrive after nine, which is bullshit. (pp. 145–6)

Johnson's representation of Australian public bars is both familiar and loaded, not only drawing from intrinsic cultural values of mateship, egalitarianism, and larrikinism, but as the authors of *Myths of Oz* observe, carrying an association with alcoholism and addiction that has long invited national pride and shame (Fiske et al., 1987/2017, p. 1). Fiske, Hodge and Turner pay particular attention to the pub in one chapter of their influential *Myths of Oz*, where it is framed as a gathering place both central and ubiquitous to domestic life – 'a home away from home' (1987/2017, p. 5). *Ferocious Animals* engages with the distinct iconicity of the Australian landscape and quintessential markers of national identity in stories that occasionally push out from realism yet are undeniably steeped in the mundane.

Alongside the pub, backyard pools, farmhouses, suburban streets and the Riverland serve rhetorical and expressive functions in Johnson's writing, evoking emotional and symbolic features of place. E.V. Walter's work on the subjective dimensions of place is useful here, particularly, his definition of place as 'a concrete milieu and an expressive universe within specific social and physical boundaries, with a location in psychical space and time and an identity' (1988, p. 143). For Walter, places can be 'seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, revered, enjoyed, or avoided' (1988, p. 142). A visceral sense of place is perhaps the most compelling and salient feature of *Ferocious Animals*: by evoking an imaginary experience of the past through nostalgic reference to a specific, yet unspecified, period of time, Johnson presents readers with a world that feels familiar in its foundations.

That is, Johnson crafts emotionally affective, intimate stories that nurture a wistful longing for the ways we used to live. A time uncomplicated by the various modes, profiles, platforms and technologies now used to constitute ourselves and contextualise our lives in modernity. In a world set ostensibly in the remote past, nostalgia presents a particular rhetorical position from which to assert a cultural identity. References to phone booths, post offices, landlines, and VideoEzy stores cultivate a powerful sense of sentimentality for the 'simple life' and the regional middle-class experience. However, Johnson takes care to mitigate this nostalgic vision with explorations of the abject human condition and the human potential for brutality. The phone booth is 'covered in graffiti', its receiver 'blackened and partly misshapen at the ear end from where somebody had held a lighter to it' (p. 36). The VideoEzy is located on

the main street of town, full of ‘P-platers sitting on the bonnets of their cars’, blaring some monotonous, forgettable dance song (p. 145).

This representation of nostalgia recalls the Greek epistemology of word: painful homecoming. Stories framed by wholesome traditions of ordinary, domestic life expand under Johnson’s treatment to bring the darker realities of the present day into the picture. For example, the titular story, ‘Ferocious Animals’, first published in *Griffith Review*, centres on a family’s preparations for a local football grand-final, which are disrupted by an unwanted visitor. The trappings of quiet domesticity (a mother cooking a fried breakfast) and Saturday morning sports rituals (a father and son wearing matching jerseys) elicit a potent nostalgic tone – one that is, at the same time, permeated with the threat of violence culminating in a tense standoff with the unknown driver of an old yellow Falcon.

By illustrating the minutiae of the everyday which render shocking heartache, grief, and loss as intensely palpable, Johnson deftly captures short story fiction at its most affecting. These stories are profound in their ordinariness and promote an understanding of life as lived through complexities, contradictions, and collisions. Each one is distinctly memorable, yet this interior world features a breadth of characters that are all wounded, failing, in need of compassion, that read as if existing in the same town, the same neighbourhood. As ‘Bass Minx’ tumbles into ‘A Gift Unwrapped’ and ‘Serious Things’, readers follow young women who are disenfranchised by the power-dynamics of their relationships and cast a vision of the depth of human need and desperation. Notions of the nuclear family illustrated in ‘Ferocious Animals’ are exploded in ‘Matrimonial Property’ where betrayal and infidelity begin a rippling effect of emotional wreckage. While the stories in *Ferocious Animals* appear fractured, even discontinuous, they form part of an evolving, layered collection that follows a common thread for the intricacies and disparities of lived experience. Such is the meticulous and essential craft of narrative structure, according to Glenda Adams:

Structure is a tremendously emotional part of the story. It’s not just a framework that you hang your subject matter on, like washing on the line; it is integral to the emotion of the story, so if you find the right *shape* for your story, whatever it is, it will add to it. (as cited in Hodgins, 2001, p. 151)

The *shape* of this collection evokes the rhythms and energies of the most effective short-form writing: Johnson delicately weaves the banal with the precarious in stories which leave their resolution for the reader to determine. His work proves the fine art of storytelling with intimation rather than in absolutes and, for the most part, manages a deft balance between building suspense and burying the lead. ‘When We Were Eight Together’ might edge on predictability, for it premises a common narrative trope for childhood grief and loss; however, other stories succeed in holding readers in tense anticipation of a climactic, though not always revelatory, moment. ‘The Conditional Past’ tracks a game of hide-and-seek between siblings Jessie, Cam, and Robbie that begins, ‘It would have started the usual way, with a squabble over who got first go at hiding and who had to count’ (p. 73). The repetition of the past-tense

modal, which in grammatical terms denotes a lost opportunity, here offers glimpses of an unstoppable tragedy that is both gut-wrenching and captivating. From the first ‘would have’, readers are immersed in a vivid, gripping plot that, as it unfolds, fosters our expectations for catastrophe while still managing to surprise and confound in what is left unsaid.

Ferocious Animals fulfils the promise of the best Australian fiction to tunnel into the core of national identity to expose the powerlessness of the individual within the harshness of the social environment. The effect is a uniquely composite image of a not-so-past world transmuted in stories that subvert class, ideology and identity to interrogate intrinsic aspects of our Australian way of life. Johnson’s attention to craft and lyrically restrained prose makes *Ferocious Animals* an excellent fit for Recent Work Press, an Australian small-press imprint that specialises primarily in poetry and short textual works. The distinction of this collection is self-evident, as select stories have featured in Australian literary journals such as *Island* (‘When We Were Eight Together’), *Westerly* (‘The Names of Dead Horses’), *Southerly* (‘The Conditional Past’) and *Overland* (‘The Secret Spot’), among others.

The world of *Ferocious Animals* is not black and white. Its characters cannot be bundled into common tropes of heroic protagonists or evil villains and, crucially, readers are not asked to judge or condemn them. What this collection *does* offer is an understanding of humans as intensely and expectedly fallible – people who are impulsive, selfish, vain, and violent, who often live with deep regret and heartache. Johnson fundamentally emphasises the collisions and interconnectedness evident in a world that is heaving with pain and loss, but also great beauty and wisdom, wherein each life is twisted and intertwined. The nuanced pathos of *Ferocious Animals* is perhaps summarised in ‘The Secret Spot’ (the conclusion to the collection), in the campfire stories told to a boy by his father: ‘There are lessons in these stories, and the lessons seem to Anthony as familiar as the stories, which are familiar to the point of being visibly worn through’ (p. 208).

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