Too Close for Comfort

Pip Smith
For Tim,
who cracked open my imagination,

and Judith,
who taught me how to use it.
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Foreword

Pip Smith’s *Too Close for Comfort* is the inaugural winner of the Helen Anne Bell Poetry Bequest, a biennial prize for a book of poetry by an Australian female poet which deals in some way with Australian culture. This award (and future awards) has been made possible by a generous bequest from the estate of Helen Anne Bell, a former student at the University of Sydney. The inaugural award in 2013 drew a highly competitive field of entries, but the judges, Joanne Burns, Jill Jones and myself, felt that Pip Smith’s poems were the ones which engaged most robustly and imaginatively with Australian life, concerns, and culture in the 21st century.

In *Too Close for Comfort*, Smith approaches her subjects in highly inventive ways, and this is one of the most engaging and impressive features of her work. Whether she is writing a lyric, a prose poem, a sonnet, a poem with a political message, a poem about ideas, places or people, Pip Smith is able to find original ways of presenting her material. You can sense in her work that she constantly questions and tests her language, putting it through hoops, making it roll over backwards. Smith reins in language from so many sources – songs, pop culture, the internet, to name a few – and these give the poems impressive linguistic buoyancy and make them feel absolutely contemporary. She is a most inventive phrase-maker. ‘Now that’s cricket’ hilariously uses cricket terms and jargon as the terms of reference for a relationship: ‘Do I have to spell it out? Hit. Your. Middle. Stump. / Into. My. Sticky. Wicket. What? Is my harrow drive too googly?’ The poet’s questioning of language and human contexts is deeply engaging, as is the fact that the poems eschew mere cleverness and don’t hide behind obscurity or indulge in angst or world-weariness. Instead the
poems are energetic, dynamic and extremely pleasurable while all the time engaging with serious ideas.

Pip Smith’s use of form, lineation, imagery and rhythm are very finely achieved. In ‘How to reason with snakes’, the traditional structure of the pantoum has been reconfigured in a unique way. The various free verse arrangements of many poems have also been executed with flair and aplomb. Smith’s poems are always loyal to her own voice and to the notion that poems need to be playful and inventive as they go along, open to language’s transparencies as well as its self-reflexive qualities. She has an admirable ability to steer her poems away from predictable scenarios or outcomes and really give them a strong and original edge, seeking out connections and implications which make the poems stronger and which heighten their reach. *Too Close for Comfort* announces the arrival of a new and impressive voice in Australian poetry.

Judith Beveridge