

The Light Ascending *reading notes*

Edited by **ASHLEY HAY**

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Welcome to the inaugural Griffith Review Bookclub, which celebrates *The Light Ascending*. This edition includes the four winners from our seventh novella project alongside new shorter fiction and non-fiction, and new poetry from Australia and beyond.

The title for this collection was suggested both by the beautiful cover artwork (by Monica Rohan, a graduate of Griffith University's Queensland College of Art) and by the sense of transcendence and transformation in so many of the pieces the book holds. Ashley Hay's introduction to the collection (which you can listen to online at griffithreview.com/articles/in-the-small-hours) picks up on these themes, and the idea of illumination, to guide readers into the book.

She writes:

If [a day's] dawning, this beginning, represents the start of a new story, then the stories in this edition of *Griffith Review*... each set out from their own distinct points of illumination. A woman takes a hill too fast on her bike and flies into a new world; three misfits walk towards the space of new performance, a new home; a grandmother is recovered from fable, fairytale and Egypt; a heartbroken sister sells sublime sweetness to her old town; a pleasure dome glistens and shimmers on the edge of colonial Brisbane, a magic black panther tucked into the centre of itself; a family transcends a moment of loss and violence; a young girl transcends the strange gaze visited on any muse. These are stories of exploration and revelation; tales of taking flight and breaking free; tales of discovery and recovery.

We asked each contributor to this edition to set their own questions for you to invite you into their work. Some of those questions dive deeper than others, but we hope they'll all give you another glimpse into these writers' minds as well as into their words.

Thank you for bringing *The Light Ascending* into your bookclub.



Cover image: **Monica Rohan**, *Cold frizzle* 2016

“Griffith Review's Novella Project is one of the world's leading novella competitions, and is the cornerstone of the revitalisation of the form in Australia.

– **Nick Earls**

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Poem

'Pursuit music',
Sarah
Holland-Batt

(page 83)

Sarah Holland-Batt has talked about being drawn to poetry by 'the musical qualities of language... my initial reaction to literature was a musical one. I understood poetry first as a species of composition'. She has described 'the act of writing [as] a chase or pursuit of language'.

If you read 'Pursuit music' aloud, do these associations between words and music change the way the poem works for you?



Short fiction

'The market seller',
Holly Ringland

(page 85)

Why might Emily, Enid and Eve all have names starting with E?

What reasons could there be for Emily having different dreams to everyone else in town?



Poem

'The morning fog (A Golden Shovel after Kate Bush)',
Stuart Barnes

(page 100)

'The Golden Shovel' is a poetic form created by Terrance Hayes in homage to Gwendolyn Brooks. In 'The morning fog (A Golden Shovel after Kate Bush)' the end words of each line are, in order, taken from the first verse of Kate Bush's song 'The morning fog'. In Barnes's poem, how do form and function correspond?

Kate Bush's conceptual suite *The Ninth Wave* – side two of her *Hounds of Love* album (EMI, 1985) – is about a person drifting alone in the sea at night. 'They're at the mercy of their imagination,' Bush said, 'which I find such a terrifying thing.' 'The morning fog' is 'the song where they were rescued, is very much a song of seeing perspective, of being so grateful for everything that they have'. In Barnes's poem, what is the morning fog – 'where does it end, where does it begin' – a metaphor for? Who is the speaker addressing? And for what are they grateful?



Novella

'Instructions for a steep decline',
Julienne van Loon

(page 10)

What is the role of risk and risk-taking in this novella?

How can the narrative style and narrative structure be said to mimic the 'comascape' in which the main character is suspended?

Discuss the ways in which the novella addresses the issue of a woman's right to speak with authority in the public domain.

What is your interpretation of the final scene? What has happened to Wilhelmina Blomme?



Memoir

'Aleksandrinke',
Krissy Kneen

(page 101)

What would a feminist reading of the Aleksandrinke story look like?

How would this feminist reading differ from the cultural story that Slovenes told within their patriarchal culture at the time?

How does trauma play out in subsequent generations?



Poem

'Ingredients for preservation',
Anna Jacobson

(page 116)

'Ingredients for preservation' drew on Anna Jacobson's days as a museum studies student and her knowledge of materials used for preservation: calico, blueboard, corflute, mylar, Ethafoam and Tyvek. She has used these materials as jumping-off points for her poem and investigated the idea of preserving light, and what happens when we let go of the need to preserve everything. Anna writes that she tries to 'find the treasure in the everyday of my own world'.

What objects or materials from your own workplace or life could you weave into a poem or piece of writing?

Where could these objects take you?

Do you look at these objects differently in light of reading 'Ingredients for preservation'?



Short fiction

'Chronicles of the Maiwar mangroves',
Pat Hoffie

(page 118)

Pat Hoffie's piece jumps across two time zones – Brisbane in the late 1800s, and the present day. Why might a writer choose to do that?

How does this temporal shift change what a story can do?



Poem
'Orison',
Laura Taylor

(page 131)

An 'orison' is a prayer. How does the poem of this orison speak to moments of loss – or connection – in your own life?



Poem
'Q&A',
Shastra Deo

(page 192)

Shastra Deo wrote 'Q&A' while attempting to interview Talk to Transformer, a modern neural network that completes or responds to text typed in by a user. Talk to Transformer runs a version of OpenAI's language model, which is capable of generating (generally) coherent paragraphs of text one word at a time. What struck Shastra about the responses was how self-assured the AI sounded, even when its answers were factually incorrect or bordering on nonsensical. This got her thinking about what data and information we can trust in a post-truth society.

Shastra is also interested in how bodies interface with machines – to what extent we can intermingle, whether machines know they are 'bodies' of sorts, what constitutes a body, what separates a body from an apparatus.

How do you think about these different definitions of 'bodies' after reading this poem?

How did you respond to the neural network's answers to Shastra's questions?



Poem
'Meteorology',
Ella Jeffery

(page 191)

Discuss how the poem engages with ideas about weather forecasts and other ways that we try to predict, guess or control what's going to happen in our future. What do you envision the future might be like for the speaker of the poem? How does the weather affect the way you feel about the future?

Is it true that 'everyone loves / to talk about the weather'? Does discussing the weather bring us together, or isolate us? Why do you think this is?

Sometimes the weather feels deeply personal. Consider the voice and tone of the poem – how does the speaker feel about the weather?



Novella
'Cleave',
Keren Heenan

(page 132)

'Cleave' is a character-driven story. Which character do you have the most empathy for, and why?

What was it that caused Parker to be so easily swayed by Dorothy?

One of the themes emerging from the story revolves around the 'outsider'. Was this state chosen by the characters or thrust upon them? Discuss how this drives the story.



Novella

‘Annah the Javanese’,
Mirandi Riwoe

(page 229)

From her research, Mirandi Riwoe could guess what might have happened to Annah immediately following the events described in the novella. From what you have read, what do you think happened to Annah?

Mirandi still wonders how Annah came to be in Paris in the 1890s. Can you offer some suggestions as to how Annah found herself in Paris during that period?

What role can literature or fiction play in investigating silences in history? How can they give voice to those elided or ignored in their own time?



Novella

‘Spectrums’,
Allanah Hunt

(page 194)

The Aboriginality of the main characters is obscured at the beginning of the novella. Did your thinking shift if you originally thought the main characters were white Australian? And did you think of the death in custody any differently once the Aboriginality of the characters was made explicit?

What do you think of the differences between the newspaper accounts of the death in custody as opposed to what you read as having happened in ‘real life’?



Poem

‘Cape York’,
Stuart Cooke

(page 98)

How would you describe the mood of the speaker in the poem?

Does the poem ‘peak’ at a particular point?

Does the poem’s place appear to be a static landscape or somewhere more dynamic?



Poem

‘Routines’,
Daniel Swain

(page 227)

What do you make of the final paragraph in this poem? How does it relate to the rest of the poem?

Which routines structure your life? What are the other significances of the title in the poem? Whose routines are being tracked or described?

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