

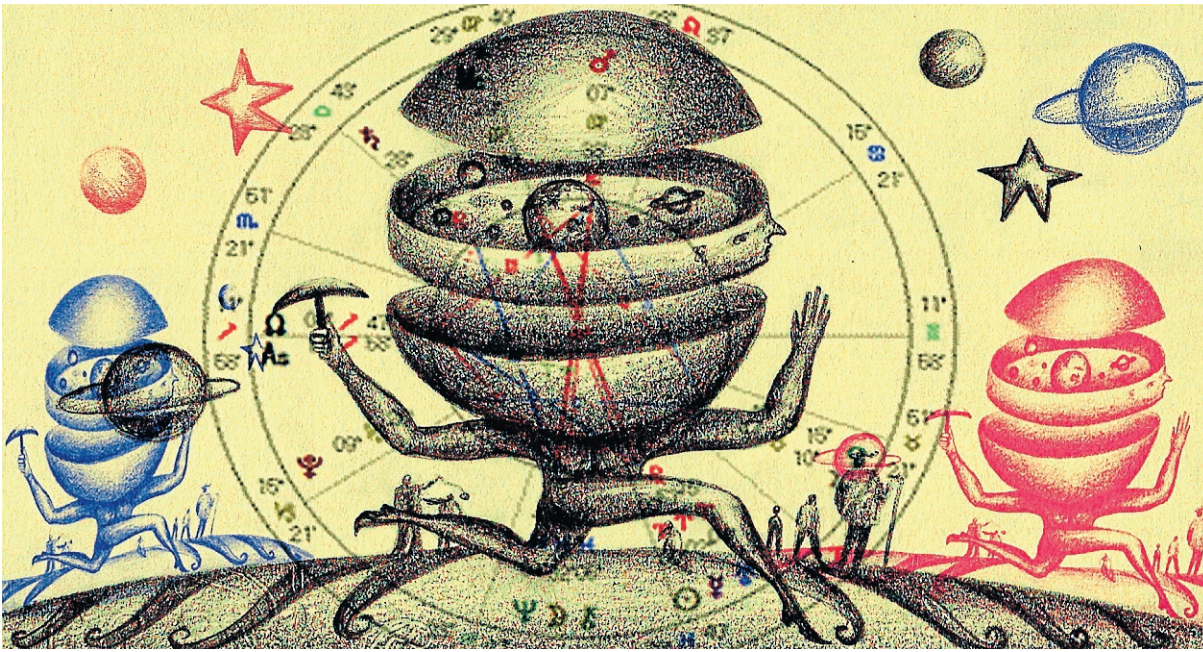


Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

When the stars align

HISTORICAL FICTION

THE LUMINARIES. By Eleanor Catton. Granta. 832pp. \$29.99.

Reviewer: **ANDREW RIEMER**

Five years ago, the young New Zealand writer Eleanor Catton made a sparkling literary debut with *The Rehearsal*, a quirky, highly original tale of teenagers, saxophones and the actor's craft. Now comes a startlingly different second novel: an intricate and leisurely historical fable about the gold rush of 1866 in the South Island of New Zealand, particularly around a settlement called Hokitika.

The Luminaries brings to mind the slow-paced amplitude of 19th-century three-decker novels – it is in some ways a Victorian whodunit. On the first page a Scotsman called Walter Moody arrives in Hokitika on January 27, 1866. Almost immediately he interrupts a meeting of 12 men in the saloon of a shabby hotel: “They might have been 12 strangers on a railway car . . . indeed, the studied isolation of each man . . . conspired to form the very type of bodily silence that occurs, late in the evening, on a public railway.”



That metaphor of 12 strangers on a train encapsulates the bold conceit at the base of this extraordinary and extraordinarily complex narrative. Each of the 12 has a tale; each illuminates one aspect or another of the mystery at the novel's heart.

It is impossible in a review such as this to account for the incidents, characters and narrative strategies of this immense novel. Remarkably, Catton manages to maintain

lucidity in the face of great complexity and in spite of – in truth as a consequence of – a time scheme that revolves around a number of precise dates in 1865 and 1866, settling at length on January 14, 1866, as the node where many narrative strands come together.

Apart from a handful of anachronisms, Catton's prose is carefully calibrated to give an impression of 19th-century diction. The descriptions of the land and seascapes around Hokitika are vivid and eloquent. The characters are

carefully delineated, their personalities minutely analysed. For instance, for the Maori Te Rau Tauwhare – one of the 12 men gathered in the saloon of the goldfields hotel – the “conception of prayer was constricted to the most ritualised and oratorical sort”. That “sensation was quite distinct from the love he felt for his family, which he experienced as a private leaping in his breast, and distinct, too, from the pride he felt in himself”.

This is typical of the way in which Catton depicts her characters. Many pages are taken up with careful analyses of their personalities, yet these analyses are almost always impersonal, even abstract. We are told how these characters feel, how they react to their circumstances, yet rarely, if ever, is there a sense of empathy between the reader and the characters whose fortunes are observed. This characteristic might be deemed to be a flaw. But its use is quite deliberate, I think, in harmony with the novel's extraordinary structural and conceptual ambitions.

The narrative focuses on 20 people: the 12 seemingly ill-assorted men in the hotel saloon, seven others whose encounters describe an elaborate pattern of conjunctions and separations, and one man, Crosbie Wells, whose death is the centre of the mystery *The Luminaries* seeks to resolve.

The novel's title, an author's note about the procession of the equinoxes, a list of the principal characters, and astrological charts at the head of each of the 12 parts give the game away. This is an astrological fable. The seven planets or wandering stars perform their seemingly incoherent yet highly choreographed dance around the 12 constellations of the zodiac, which in turn rotate around a still point. That still point is on our earth: the isolated shack where Wells met his death.

That is why those analyses of the characters' personalities have a curiously detached but authoritative tone. They are literary equivalents of astrological balderdash about the influence of the heavenly bodies on our lives.

I'm sure Catton has used this material – which is more intricate than I have space to highlight – for literary and aesthetic purposes. *The Luminaries* is a remarkable tour de force, breathtaking in the layer upon layer of astrological lore it reveals throughout its great length. Decoding such an allegory can be absorbing – like tackling cryptic crossword puzzles. I think, however, that *The Luminaries* has much more to offer, but its extravagant length and complexity might deter some readers.

A Pretty view of life and time

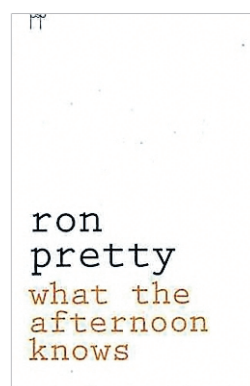
POETRY

WHAT THE AFTERNOON KNOWS. By Ron Pretty. Pitt Street Poetry. 95pp. \$20.

Reviewer: **GEOFF PAGE**

What the Afternoon Knows is the fourth collection Ron Pretty has published since 2007, when ill-health forced him to retire from an ultra-busy life as a publisher, coordinator and promoter of Australian poetry. Like the book's immediate predecessors *What the Afternoon Knows* has an autumnal lyricism about it. Many poems look back across the decades; others rejoice in the relative stillness enforced on the elderly and/or celebrate (though not unequivocally) the pleasures of extended family life.

The book is divided into three sections, beginning with a group that strongly emphasises poetry's narrative dimension. Sometimes, as with *Theseus at Eighty*, *The Emperor of Moths* and *Marco Polo & the Rhino* these poems have a historical or mythological basis. Others, such as *Barista: a love story* and *Respect* are clearly in the here and



now. Both sorts of poem are taken at a leisurely pace and are invariably sharply observed. Still others, such as *Argini* and *Being So Caught Up* are more explicitly autobiographical, though still mixed with the mythical.

The book's second section is more formally experimental, a sequence of 14 sonnets – each (of course) with 14 lines. The tone here is various, ranging from the lyrical (*Solo*) to the movingly political (*August 6*)

through to the sardonically humorous (*Grammar is Sexy* and *Eyewitness Report*). The last five poems play cleverly with the caesura, using a tab space down the centre of the poem with half a line aligned to left and right. There is a risk of such a device distracting readers from the poems' content but, in the event, as with *Lilt*, this is avoided.

The final section of *What the Afternoon Knows* is more various. The first four poems deal convincingly with issues surrounding overseas adoption. The situations here are clearly delineated and no easy conclusions are reached. Some readers may find these poems almost too direct – as, for instance, in *Folders*, where Pretty outlines the adoptees' several possible fates, suggesting that “Others // will know mainly pain and dislocation, / knowing little of what

they've come from, / knowing only that they do not fit in here. // While two may give joy to their parents”.

In addition to these more disturbing poems are several lighter ones, including an almost traditional character-sketch poem, *Cats*, which compassionately presents an old lady's reasons for church-going. Others, such as *Envoi*, explicitly address the overall theme of the collection, which derives from the Swedish proverb: “The afternoon knows what the morning never expected.”

This theme is again addressed in *Delenda est Carthago*, which points to the “hundred years of civil strife,” which followed Rome's great and complete victory over her rival, Carthage. Certainly that particular “morning” did not foresee its “afternoon”.

More characteristic of the book in general, however, is the unapologetic celebration of life in poems such as *Passeggiata* and *Change*, where Pretty seems content to enjoy the ephemeral, sensuous pleasures of life, even when so much of it can be bleak. “Why would you,” he asks in *Passeggiata*, “want to hurry when scent lingers in the air / & passion is as old as cobblestones, / as fresh as that dark lipstick curving / in a smile. Languid the night / & every move you make as slow, / as casual as the summer breeze.”

Some might quarrel with that inversion in *Languid the night*, but at a time when indirection is often taken to extremes, it's refreshing to read a collection where the poems are direct and emotionally-engaged, while still possessing the linguistic and intellectual subtlety we rightly demand of poetry.