

Sensual, concrete and naturalistic are all words that surface over and over again when describing the writing of US poet Carol Burnes. Her second collection of poems, *Fine Lines*, confronts a wide variety of issues: love, change, ageing, loss and brutality. These are all traditional themes, but through Burnes' fine use of subtlety and detail, they become complex and unique works that lead the reader in many intriguing directions.

The basic plot of the title poem involves a woman trying on clothes in a dressing room. She reassesses her life and her thoughts as she sheds her old clothes for new ones.

"Ageing. Fine lines. Searching, She gathers armloads of who she might be and in the fitting room, blinking against bright lights, she strips down, yearning for a new season."

Burnes decided to make *Fine Lines* the title poem because it encompasses all the issues dealt with in the succeeding poems.

"I felt in that first poem there were seeds or kernels of all of the rest of the poems," she explains. "It's about really who I am, where I'm at in my life. You look in the mirror and you wonder where you're headed next, what is the next costume you'll put on, who you'll be next."

The book is divided into three sections: *In Search of a New Season*, *Through the Window* and *Circles*. The first section gives the reader a glimpse of what is to come, encompassing many themes. The second section deals with issues of loss and letting go of the past. The third section consists primarily of love poems. But all three sections are interconnected, either by the poems' structures or motifs.

There are three poems which centre on Burnes' father, *Big Blue*, *At Father's Funeral* and *I Dreamed Father*. Burnes admits that writing the poems did help her come to terms with her father's death. "It empowered me because I made something out of it, rather than sit there helpless just feeling the loss. I brought it from the subconscious, intuitive world up into the intellectual, and worked with it."

Burnes gives form to her subconscious by focussing on a single object. This creates the sensual side of her poetry and helps her shape her vague thoughts and feelings.

"Most of my poems are first sparked by something concrete and real, something sensually perceived, something I see, something I hear, something I taste," she explains. "From there, once I start working on the metaphor, I go wherever the poem leads me, and often into fantasy, often into an incredible construct that I've imagined, not ever experienced. But, in the process of that sort of writing, you definitely draw on your own deep material, whatever your issue is."

All of the poems in *Fine Lines* are written in free verse, but Burnes asserts that each line-break was care-

fully constructed to create a certain affect. Her lines are often so expertly placed that one could almost look at the structure of a poem like a painting.

"I become fascinated with the power of the line to create drama, to create suspension, to create movement. And the power of white spaces, through verse, through line-breaks. I probably spend more time breaking my lines than if I were working on a rhyme scheme in a sonnet."

Many of the poems in the *Circles* section reflect on relationships between men and women. Not all of these are sentimental love poems. Several are bitter portrayals of men

who abuse women and treat them as property. In the poem *When They Enter*, Burnes writes bitterly about men who want to own women like they own cars. She writes:

"When they enter your body it's different. You let them and they think it gives them rights like signing contracts or holding title."

Despite her brutal depiction of male dominance, Burnes does not consider herself a strict feminist.

"I absolutely believe in the independence of women and I believe that women have terrific power in their own right as females. And

perhaps one of their big mistakes is in trying to say we are like men. That I don't believe. We are different. Our sexuality can be a tremendous tool if used correctly and if we realize what it is and how to use it. Instead of damning our differences, I think women should capitalize on what our differences are."

Burnes believes ownership and obligation are the main problems between men and women. "I don't believe in ownership of anybody. I don't even believe that a husband owns a wife, or that a wife owns a husband. Once you give up that basic principle, that there's no ownership, you release women from a sense of obligation and you turn it all around to privilege. I'll always fight for women to have choices and to be able to exercise them."

Although Burnes lives in the US, she travels to England four or five times a year to give performances, teach and conduct workshops. At her workshops, people who never thought they would be able to write, compose poems and other creative pieces. Similar to the method Burnes uses in her own poetry, participants focus on the physical senses through imaging, music, art and dialogue. New Age music is played while students study a shell or a feather. Then they use free association to describe the objects.

Burnes is always impressed with the wide variety of people who learn to write poetry at her workshops. "I really want to make poetry come alive to wider and wider audiences. I think poetry has become closed off. The more people hear it, the more open they'll become to it. Within all of us is the ability not to make great poetry, but to express ourselves in a very compressed fashion."

Burnes admits that she does use her workshop methods when confronted by writer's block, but she does not rely heavily on it. "As an experienced writer, I need to go beyond that. I need not to get trapped by that pattern."

In *Fine Lines*, Burnes pushed her writing style into unexplored areas. *Innuendo*, one of her most recent poems, is one of which she is particularly proud. "It's a whole new level of writing for me. It is quite complex. It works on three or four different levels and it's quite tightly constructed. It's a big poem." Burnes' aspirations for *Fine Lines* are straightforward. "My aim is to touch people, make them laugh, make them cry."

Her poems should achieve those goals, but they are sure to do so in an unexpected, unconventional manner.

Carol Burnes is in performance at the King's Head Theatre, 115 Upper St, N1 on April 26 at 8pm; in her Discoveries workshop at the Covent Garden Community Centre, 46 Earlham St, WC2 on April 28, 7.30pm-9.30pm; and will sign her books at Dillons, 48-52 Kensington High St, W8 on April 30 at 6pm.



EXPRESSIONS

Lisa Tuomivaara meets Carol Burnes of Stone Soup Poets in Boston USA, who this week is at the King's Head Islington and in workshop in Covent Garden