

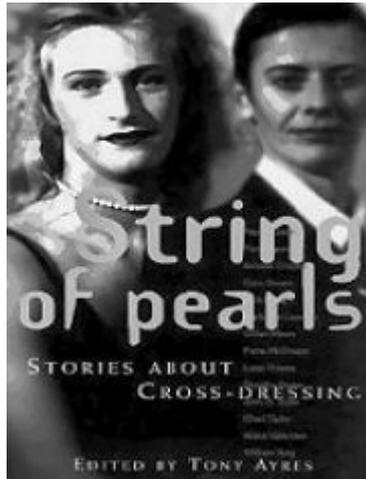
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Book Review: String of Pearls

Stories About Cross-Dressing

Reviewed by Katherine Cummings

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String of Pearls: Stories about Cross-Dressing

String of Pearls: Stories about Cross-Dressing

Authored by Paul Allatson, Catherine Lazaroo, John A. Scott, Dorothy Porter, Chad Taylor, Fiona McGregor and edited by Tony Ayres
Published by Allen & Unwin (1996)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1863739146

String of Pearls is entertaining, despite the flimsiness of its supposed theme and should satisfy readers of eclectic taste and tolerant outlook.

As 'theme' anthologies go, this one casts a looser net than most. Although each story includes cross-dressing, the motivations vary widely, from Lady Caroline Lamb trying to prolong her affair with Byron by appealing to his homosexual side to women who don butchers' aprons and play with offal. There are also more conventional(?) examples of cross-dressing.

Paul Allatson, with 'Her Aviary' takes us into the mind of a confused young man who cannot describe his missing mother and impersonates her for the police artist. But is he really the mother and not the son? Or is he both?

'Instructions to My Seamstress' by Catherine Lazaroo is a lovely story; evocative, absorbing

and with the ring of bizarre truth appropriate to the wilful, eccentric genius of Caroline Lamb, who recounts tales of her friends and enemies to her dressmaker.

Predictably, several of the stories are concerned with the Australian gay and lesbian sub-culture. 'Silhouette' by Gillian Mears, 'The Man from the Caribbean' by William Yang, 'Tsunami' by Fiona McGregor and 'Tottering Towards Darlinghurst' by Gary Dunne all fit into this category.

The most overtly drag-oriented is Gary Dunne's piece about a cross-dresser arriving at a gay function in the expectation that she will receive an award for her 'centuries of service'. The feeding frenzy of confusion, excitement and waspish wit generated by the occasion is convincing and even touching. By contrast 'The Man from the Caribbean' takes us away from the sequins of Darlinghurst to an assignation between gay men, one transient, one resident, in a small Queensland(?) town. The encounter progresses to a climax (maybe more than one) and the sting comes when the family of the philandering Queenslander return home. 'Tsunami' rings the changes by depicting the (asexual) relationship between a lesbian and a gay who support each other through various one night stands. The gay scene is described as accurately as in 'Tottering Towards ...' and economically depicts the desperate resignation of adolescents drawn by circumstances into a life of prostitution (sorry, sex work) and drugs. 'Silhouette' takes us further afield, to Paris, where a travelling Australian lesbian is transformed by her Parisienne lover into a simulacrum of her dead brother. A one-night stand with a difference, carrying overtones of incest and undertones of androgyny.

I have mentioned Alana Valentine's 'Butchers Aprons' wherein a group of women dress in butchers' gear, recount events in their youth designed to embarrass themselves and their listeners and fondle various types of offal. I found it hard to suspend my disbelief.

Nor did I understand John A. Scott's 'Elegy'. Set in short lines as if it were meant to be a long, very dull, poem, it said nothing to me. Perhaps it is post-modern and not meant to be understood. There is another poem in this collection, 'Venice - the Aria' by the award-winning poet Dorothy Porter. Poetry is personal, yet published poetry must attempt to communicate, and this communicates nothing to me but disconnected images.

'My Cock Lives in Hell' by Tony Ayres, shows us a man torn between his desire for a drag queen and his passion for genetic women, including his (very sensibly) estranged wife. Belinda Chayko in 'The Stand-in' writes as a person obsessed by Eugenia, the woman who lived as a man, deceived a number of women as to her true sex and was sentenced to death for murder.

The only really pornographic story is 'Supercollider' by Chad Taylor. It concerns a couple who go through many variations of sexual fetishistic behaviour (of which cross-dressing is merely one example). Even if I accept the fact that the female character willingly (or submissively) allows herself to be degraded, I don't have to like it. Some readers would enjoy this sort of writing, and there are whole bookshops eager to satisfy their need.

'In the Forest of the Eternals' by Louis Nowra, is a rather vague and dream-like account of Alfred Deakin in London for the Imperial Conference of 1907. During his stay he cross-dresses at a séance in order to invoke spirits who will advise him on his future. On the voyage home he discards his dress. Nowra writes well, but the story is, probably intentionally, inconclusive.

I have saved the best for last.

Nick Enright's story, 'Crystal', delineates with sureness of detail and delicacy of feeling the confusion of a drama teacher who is mesmerized by the cross-dressed persona of one of his students. There are echoes of 'The Blue Angel' as the teacher finds himself drawn into total obsession with the character created by his student, who cannot comprehend the effect of his masquerade on the older man. The ending is tragic, and believable.

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Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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