

Into the sediment

Rachel Kushner's fourth novel, melding a spy novel with an anthropological discussion, struggles to convince.

BY CHERYL PEARL SUCHER

CREATION LAKE
by Rachel Kushner
(Jonathan Cape, \$38)



Rachel Kushner is a mighty writer of fierce intelligence but whose novels I generally find less compelling and engaging than they are instructive and aspirational. Reading *Creation Lake*, Kushner's fourth work of fiction, which is shortlisted for the Booker Prize, was an exasperating and exhausting experience. The plot, such as it is, is this: the protagonist is a spy for hire whose pseudonym is Sadie Smith (we never learn her real name). She is outside of everything and deems her estrangement a consequence of her superior beauty and intelligence. Crafted in the image of a lusciously tactical Bond heroine, she has gone rogue after her contract with the FBI turned to custard when she was accused of entrapment after seducing a vulnerable young revolutionary to commit a minor act of domestic terrorism. She is now employed (by whom we do not know) to infiltrate Le Moulin, a radical environmentalist commune in rural

southwest France. The commune, made up of mostly middle-class Parisian "hippies", is dedicated to returning the land to the people, and is currently protesting a government scheme to construct "mega basins" to mitigate the effects of drought, but which deplete the water table and adversely affect local farmers. Like many collectives, the Moulinards are selective, their members chosen by the cabal's charismatic leader, Pascal Balmy. Sadie has joined their outer ranks by seducing Balmy's childhood friend, Lucien, a film-maker away on location. Sadie is living in his family home, the "Dubois house", owned by him due to primogeniture. They are communicating mostly by text. Sadie, one of the few Americans at the commune, is employed by the Moulinards as a translator. There is a sexual cast to the Moulinards, Pascal its charismatic centre. But the philosophical centre of the group as well as the novel lies in the



Rachel Kushner: "Tunnelling down into the sedimented secrets of human existence".

emails to the Moulinards from elder Bruno Lacombe, hiding in caves due to his fugitive status. The chapters of the novel are short, but they are often Bruno's philosophical disquisitions, by way of those long and discursive emails, which stall whatever plot remains.

These are intelligent but dull primers on European ecoterrorism, anarchist philosophy and an examination of the conflicting development of homo sapiens and Neanderthals (often referred to as Thals) through primitive artwork discovered in the caves where Bruno is hiding. It's all complex and some critics believe it to be brilliant, but if I had wanted to read Guy Debord and Gilles Deleuze, I would have read them. Reading *Creation Lake*, I was reminded by a workshop instructor that novels which adhere to a philosophical premise are bound to fail. Perhaps that's wrong. These are Kushner's own words about the novel's inspiration. "The novel takes place over six weeks, but the real trajectory is not chronological. It is Earth to sky. Through Bruno, I felt I was tunnelling down into the sedimented secrets of human existence, digging a hole through the centre of the Earth. When I got there, I was able to see the cosmos from a chambered but roofless place, an unreachable wonder framed in a human content." For this reviewer, it was all simply unreachable. ■

Round trip

Astronauts circle the Earth, reflecting on life & beyond.

BY MARK BROATCH

ORBITAL
by Samantha Harvey
(Vintage, \$26)

In a day, the International Space Station swings around the Earth 16 times. Space tries to rid its inhabitants of the notion of days – "it takes their 24 hours and throws 16 days and nights at them in return."



Orbital spends that day, those 16 revolutions, with six souls – four astronauts and two cosmonauts – suspended above the planet in their "great H of metal", crossing oceans and borders. Not much happens. Sure, there is a typhoon steaming towards Indonesia and the Philippines. But the astronauts' time awake is taken up with tasks – monitoring microbes and mice, crystals, cress and cabbages, cleaning and fixing, taking photographs, eating, exercising. "Their day is mapped by acronyms, MOP, MPC, PGO, RR, MRI, CEO, OESI, WRT for WSS, T-T-A-B." Beneath the fiction lies an incredible amount of fact-gathering, but the fundamental interest of Samantha Harvey – each of whose novels is singular: a death in a medieval village, a man struck with Alzheimer's, an epistolary novel of friendship and betrayal – lies in what makes us human. Amid the duties, the six think and remember and fear and hope for their families below, hopelessly bound by gravity. And worry about a planet "contoured and landscaped by want". Were it only for the author's research and supreme act of imagination, *Orbital* would be a worthy Booker finalist. But it is also a work of sustained luminous prose, not least the splendidly elegant variation in sunrises and continents slipping beneath them. "The vast spill of day" ... "just as the ocean runs out" ... "pile the island up like a sandcastle hastily built". Though never less than captivating, its novella-length brevity also ensures it doesn't outstay its welcome. A perfectly formed work of fiction. ■

Waxing lyrical

A round-up of new poetry from Kiwi writers, well-known and new.

BY NICHOLAS REID

SLENDER VOLUMES
by Richard von Sturmer
(Spoor Books, \$38)

This is one of those very rare collections that is at once thoughtful, coherent and very engaging – calming us in an uncertain world. Von Sturmer, once a punk performer and lyricist for Kiwi band Blam Blam Blam, is a Zen Buddhist. His 300 prose poems here are inspired by ancient Zen lore, written as "kōan" (stanzas), each strictly seven lines long. Most are headed with a nod to Zen masters of old. But while

he does sometimes refer to ancient times, most of the poems are in the present. Autobiographical confession is here. Von Sturmer has a delight in small things and their importance – leaves blown about by the wind, a bird landing on a step, the contents of a pantry. The welfare of animals concerns him. Then there are the momentous things, such as the decaying, ever-changing nature of cities, with Auckland as his model. Or war. Or the legacy of distant history. Not that von Sturmer is always deadly serious. Much of the charm is the jocular deadpan way he presents many anecdotes which, in true Buddhist style, leave us to work out the moral. A very readable work.

KOE: An Aotearoa ecopoetry anthology
edited by Janet Newman and Robert Sullivan
(Otago University Press, \$50)

Koe, a collection of 200 poems, concerns itself with ecology and the health or pollution of the Earth as we know it. All poets but Hone Tuwhare get a single poem, some well-known and others less so. The collection is divided into three parts, each introduced by Janet Newman's discussions on three eras of ecopoetry – pre-20th century, from the 1930s to 2000, and present day. Much early Pākehā poetry is idyllic, lamenting the loss of picturesque forests and native flora. The first Māori to write in English lamented the confiscation of land. By

the mid-century, there were more overt protest poems, against the raising of Lake Manapouri, testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific and, in a telling poem by Arapera Blank, *Conversation with a ghost*, the degradation of cities. Protest ecopoems are now mainstream, often with an angry tone, including Tusiata Avia's *Fucking St Barbara*, loudly cursing a mining company ripping up a Pacific island, and Tim Jones' *All That Summer*, presenting an apocalyptic vision of Wellington drowned by rising sea. A great browser collection and capacious read.

NOW AND THEN: Poems about generations
by various editors
(Landing Press, \$25)

Landing Press took a very democratic approach in producing *Now and Then*, putting out a call for submissions. It received 550 and chose 91. Well-known writers sit alongside first-time writers, and bearing in mind its theme, there is work from the old to the very young. An anthology like this will always be uneven, but there are many plums. The

focus is on ageing, refugees, protest, the foods of different ethnicities, assertion of identity and the power of women. Tread carefully and you will find some great work, such as Wesley Hollis's heartfelt *Disconnected*, Xavierniva Sao's *Bananas and Taro* or Sherrie Lee's *Mama*. And the excellent summing up of a Tongan mother in Mele Peau's *Bring up a child in the way he should go*.

Also well worth reading: *A Branch Torn Down*, by James K Baxter (Cold Hub Press, \$42.50): a large collection of all Baxter's unpublished or uncollected works in his lifetime. *Endings* by Bruce Bisset (Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop, \$29.95): selected by David Eggleton, the free-wheeling Bisset's best work from 1984 to 2023. *Awakening to Timelessness: The Titrangi Poems* by Ron Riddell (Casa Nueva Publications, \$25): a paean to the pleasure of returning to Auckland's wild west coast and its natural features. *Hotel Theresa* by Doc Drumheller (Cold Hub Press, \$28): a poet with US and NZ citizenship writes of many countries and moods. ■

