

## BLUE WREN

BRON BATEMAN

### ABOUT THE BOOK

A poetry collection that speaks of the roar inside the woman, these poems are structured around a suite of Frida Kahlo paintings and are love poems, poems of tenderness and anger, queer passion and fulfilment, and maternal gratitude. They are a powerful way of healing, of reclaiming the past and of embracing the beauty of contemporary times.

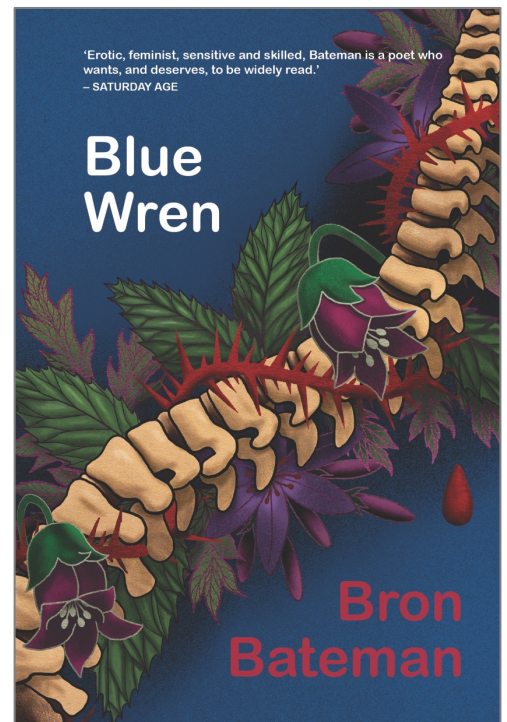
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bron Bateman is a poet, academic and mother of nine. She is a researcher and writer at the University of Newcastle. Her research interests include crip and queer theory, cultural studies, creative writing, feminism, the body, and gender theory. Her first poetry collection, *People from Bones* (with Kelly Pilgrim), was published in 2002. Her second, *Of Memory and Furniture*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2020. She has had her work published in collections and journals in Australia, the UK and the US.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These book club notes invite the reader to participate with their own writing in response to the poems in the volume and to the poet's own project in exploring the relationship between lived experience and poetry.

1. Is it important for the reader to be familiar with the work of Frida Kahlo to read this collection?
2. What do you see as the relationship between poetry and art?
3. Why do you think that the poet has structured her poems around Kahlo's paintings? How do the poems in each part interact with a Kahlo painting?
4. How does each part speak to its painting?
5. When the poet takes control of difficult subject matter by shaping it into a poem, how does this change the relationship between trauma and the subject, and between the speaker and memory? Possible poems to consider in light of this question are:
  - 'A River in Your Hands' (p. 43)
  - 'At Twenty-four' (p.57)
  - 'Fourth Avenue' (p. 79)
  - 'Fishing with My Father, 1974' (p. 87)
  - 'A Letter to My Mother' (p. 89)
6. What do you see as the relationship between poetry and sexuality? What poems in the collection could you use in your discussion about this relationship?
7. What is the most memorable poem for you in this collection and why?
8. What is the most difficult poem for you in this collection and why?
9. What is the most relatable poem for you in this collection and why?
10. What is the most uncomfortable poem for you in this collection and why?
11. What is the most courageous poem for you in this collection and why?



## EXERCISES

- A. Write a poem in response to a piece of art of your choice. How does one enrich the other? Does the poem exist independently for readers who do not know the referenced piece of art?
- B. Choose a poem title from the contents page and use it as a prompt to write a poem of the same title.
- C. Taking the poems from pp. 49–68 as a prompt, make a list of autobiographical poems and subjects you might consider writing about that span a period of your life (e.g. childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age). (If you like, you can go on to write some of these poems as a focused project.)
- D. Using the poems on pp. 23–28 as a prompt, write a secret poem (positive or negative) to a significant other. (This is a poem you may or may not choose to share.)
- E. Taking the poems on pp. 71–76 as a prompt, write a poem that can be situated in a historical context.
- F. Taking the poem on p. 77 as a prompt, write a poem about a time in which you have felt marginalised.
- G. Taking the poems on pp. 78, 81 and 83 as a prompt, write a poem about a familial relationship that highlights the complexity of that relationship. (This is a poem you may or may not choose to share.)
- H. In what ways is the human body a poem? Where does memory reside in your body, and how can these memories be used to create poetry? Write a poem that is a conversation with some part of your physical self.
- I. If given the chance, what is the first question you would ask the author?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What do you see as the relationship between art and poetry?***

Former American Poet-Laureate Joy Harjo has said ‘without poetry we lose our way’, and I see the relationship between art and poetry as one that has resounding significance in these treacherous, traitorous times. I do not see it as any coincidence that as we struggle with COVID-19 and encroaching war in Europe, with the rise of neo-liberalism and right-wing ideologies, that the importance of art and poetry is felt throughout our communities. My relationship with the West Australian writing community is currently as strong as it has ever been, and we console and encourage one another with our words, our support and our outrage at the world we are threatening to leave for our children and grandchildren.

Art matters for its own sake, and the collaborations with visual artists, photographers, film-makers, bread-makers and bakers, singers and songwriters, those who take part in craft, and with poets, have given resonance and added profundity, depth and purpose to us all in times of lockdowns and increasing infection statistics. More than ever, we need art, and I believe, poetry, to help us make meaning of the world. More than ever, the creation of artistic endeavours acts as a balm and solace to a world that often doesn’t make sense to us at all. I hope this book and the writing of others, particularly West Australian writers, find a wide audience and that many make sense of their own experiences through the words of poets.

### ***What is it about the art of Frida Kahlo that made you see it as a focus for your own writing?***

The first time I saw some of the art of Frida Kahlo, I had a moment of profound, shocked realisation. Here was a person, who though different from me in time and culture, artistic representation, and genius, shared with me a fundamental understanding of the female body in all its gory grief, loss and pain. She was not able to have the experience of motherhood, but she understood that motherhood had, at its core, a sense of violation

and pain, loss and achievement. I also felt I had resonance with the tension she felt with her siblings and her parents. She loved them but felt ambivalent about some of their impact on her life. Her relationship with her husband, Diego, was fractured, passionate, joyous and painful. I didn't have that literal experience in my life, but I believe I understood some of what she was feeling.

I also understood her affiliation with history, spirituality and the soothing influence of animals and their ability to bring comfort and uncomplicated love. She was as much a writer as she was an artist, and I felt an affinity with the beauty of her words. She wrote letters and kept visual journals all her life and once again, her genius goes without saying, but I longed to be more like her and to use her art as an inspiration for my own writing. I invite anyone to google the paintings I have listed in my poems and begin to realise the symbolic and literal power of her work, and how I have tried to harness this power and tie their influence to the narrative of this collection.

### ***What did you learn about yourself in writing this collection?***

I learn so much about myself during the writing process. I have said elsewhere that writing functions as a form of memory recuperation for me and knowing this, I have broadened my focus in this collection to encompass family and aspects of my life across the span of years and experiences. Each captured moment functions as a snapshot of reality for me, and while it is no secret that I tend to write auto/biography, there are moments of impersonal experience that may be surprising to people who know me and those who want to know more about me. I have learned that comparing myself to others is not a good idea, but that reuniting with my broader family, as I have done in recent years, has enriched my life in profound ways. And this enrichment has added depth to my writing as well as my experience.

I see myself in this collection as mother, lover, daughter, sister and friend, and in each of these roles my self-knowledge has broadened and nuanced my writing and my experience of selfhood. That is such an important thing to say. Ageing does not necessarily bring wisdom, and we all know people who are aged, but not wise. I hope that anyone who has also read *Of Memory and Furniture* sees that my self-awareness has grown and the reasons for my responses to my life have a meaning and context. I also hope that I have grown as a writer. My pride in this collection is because it is truly my voice and my development of writing skills and styles. I have had such enjoyment in exploring the work of Frida Kahlo and making associations with her understanding of the body in pain and her treatment of loss and grief with my own lived experience. She has always been my heroine and even more so after writing this collection. I continue to grow and mature as a writer and as a person, and I hope that is evidenced in this collection.

### ***What's next for Bron Bateman?***

I am currently at work on two projects. One is that I have begun working on poems for a fourth collection. I am so excited to be working on new poems and I am stretching myself in this writing experience. This collection is in its very early stages, but I have ideas in mind and am focusing on the research I am doing at the University of Newcastle to be a part of my creative work. I don't want to say too much about it yet, but it is a different focus for me, less about family and family trauma, and more about embodiment and bodily experiences of pain, and exploring the nature of mutability and the ageing process. It wouldn't be Bron Bateman's work if it didn't dip into the well of grief and loss, but this, too, is experienced in a more embodied way. My second project is a foray into a work of theory and creative production, with the University of Newcastle, which once again I don't want to say too much about, lest I jinx it. I hope also to participate in an edited collection, which does not even exist as a project beyond some conversation and some creative ideas. Editing is something I have experience of in my academic life and it is profoundly exciting to consider combining this with my creative production.