

*What Poets Need: A Novel* by Finuala Dowling (Penguin)

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Finuala Dowling is a poet living in Kalk Bay who has written a novel about a poet living in Kalk Bay. This combination, taken with the book's title, may seem to the wary reader to augur another solemn introspection into the poetic psyche, not to mention the poetic ego.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As the book's sub-title insists, this is a novel, and, whatever there may be of the autobiographical in the material, it has been fully fictionalised. Indeed, the tension between 'life' and poetry, and between poetry and fiction, becomes part of the subject matter: running through the book is an implicit dialogue between poetry and fiction, in which Dowling exploits their different demands and different possibilities in an intricate and engrossing manner.

Just to settle the autobiographical question, Dowling's protagonist, John Carson, is male, and, unlike Dowling, has not made much of a splash with his poetry. His debut volume *The Secret Life of Things*, was scuppered in a review by the "uneuphonious" Tizzy Clack, "a twenty-three year old English master's graduate who was looking to carve a journalistic niche for herself," and, at thirty-eight, he has not achieved much in any other field of endeavour either. He has, however, landed a paid position as editor of a poetry journal, *The Unofficial View*, and probably the strongest narrative thread in the novel is Carson's compiling of an edition of this journal. Not the least of the pleasures offered by the book is the sampling of the poems submitted for Carson's consideration.

Intertwined with this relatively impersonal project is Carson's obsessive love affair with Theresa, the wife of an ex-employer. Theo, the husband, has found out about the affair, and now the contact between the lovers has been reduced to an e-mail correspondence, John's side of which in fact forms the body of this novel.

*What Poets Need*, then, is a modern version of that old-fashioned form, the epistolary novel, and Dowling exploits the form and overcomes its limitations with unobtrusive skill. True, sometimes Theresa has to be informed of facts she may be assumed to be conscious of, but Carson's tone of fond recollection makes this quite plausible as the lover's dwelling on an unrecoverable past.

Given the nature of the book's central relationship, the book's dominant note is nostalgic, even melancholy. But John is also living in the midst of a lively and demanding family, a divorced sister with a precocious seven-year old daughter, and there is not much time for ruminations on unrequited or at any rate unconsummated love.

When Beth, the sister, flits off to Johannesburg ostensibly to oversee a project but in fact to pursue the affair she is having with the client, John is left in charge of Sal, the daughter. In addition, his best friend's mother, the once-glamorous and now approaching-dottiness Mrs Cloete, lives in the guest cottage in the back yard; and the kennels phone to say that Lord Nicholas, the best friend's dog, is trying to dig himself out of his cage and has to be fetched. There is also Tiny, the Bergie, who drops in for regular negotiations involving no work for Tiny and all pay for John, and a bevy of "Holy Cross mothers", whom John meets through ferrying Sal to and from school.

To complicate matters further, Sal develops what seems to be incipient anorexia, an ironic if possibly understandable response to John's passion for food. In a particularly

unpleasant form of poetic justice, John is contracted to write doggerel for a Kalk Bay restaurant on the subject of the place's culinary offerings, several nauseating examples of which we are offered.

The book, in other words, refuses to see poetry as a rarefied activity that takes place in isolation from the everyday activities that make up most lives. At the same time, it acknowledges that poetry, unlike fiction, cuts out, distils and decontextualises. When Vera, one of the Holy Cross mothers, sends John the rather turgid opening paragraphs of her novel, he advises her to "Try it as a 22-line poem." She turns it into a nifty little Haiku.

When John sends Theresa a slightly self-pitying imaginary description of herself and her husband entertaining friends at their Hermanus beach house, she tells him that it "could make a poem." He cuts out the reference to Hermanus, rearranges the paragraph in lines, and turns it into the poem that ends the book.

This may be an over-simplified version of how poems happen (take out the names and cut up the lines), but it is a nicely teasing conclusion to a novel about a poet: does the novel or the poem best express the human experience behind and in the work?

*What Poets Need* is, in the end, a kind of paradox: a novel about poetry, a melancholy celebration of the extraordinariness of ordinary things, a love letter that is also a long good bye, a very funny reflection on the sadness of things, a sad recollection of past joy, a lonely man's pleasure in the companionableness of his life, a transmutation of loss into fictional gain. And Finuala Dowling is now a poet who has written a wonderful novel.