

AHEAD OF US

DENNIS HASKELL

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YEAR LEVEL: Y10–12+

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

ABOUT THE BOOK

This is Haskell's eighth book of poetry. Dedicated to his wife Rhonda, who lost her battle with cancer after a long illness, *Ahead of Us* contains poems of love, of two people forging a partnership together and of the inevitable end of that partnership when one person dies. It is a celebration of life and of the fragile thread that holds us here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Haskell is Emeritus Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia and a poet whose work has been published nationally and internationally. He has been Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts and is currently Chair of writingWA.

THEMES

- Love
- Illness
- Death
- Grief
- Spirituality

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y10 English
- Y11-12 English
- Y11-12 Literature

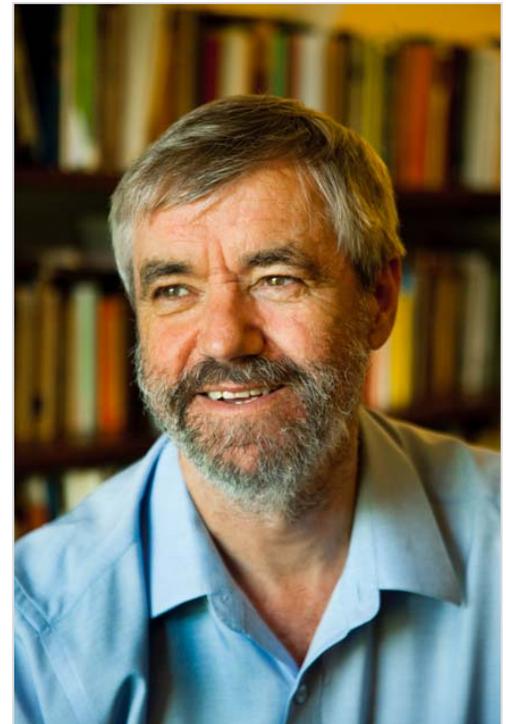
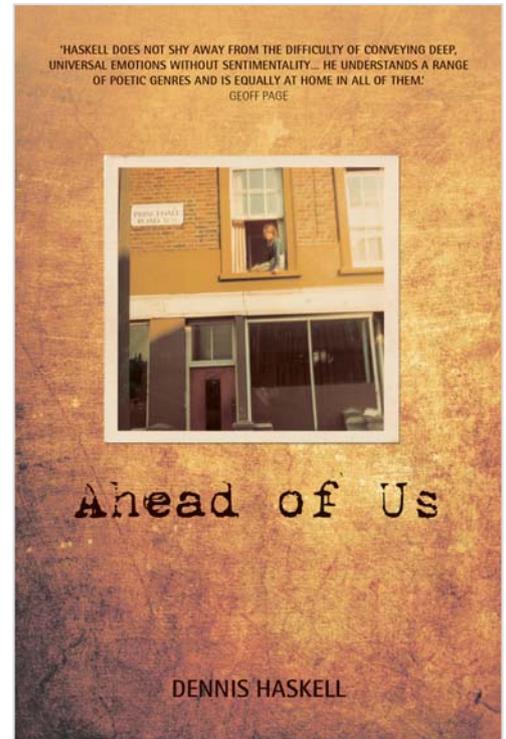
USEFUL WEBSITES

- <http://www.australianpoetrycentre.org.au/>
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. 'This poetry (I hope) has an immediacy which is part of its impact; on every reading you are experiencing the event at that moment.' Dennis Haskell.
 - a. Do you agree with the poet's observation about this volume?
 - b. What stylistic choices/ literary devices help create this effect? Utilise examples from at least two poems.
 - c. What is the impact of this 'immediacy' for you as a reader? Turn to a partner and share.
2. What is the significance of the three-part structure of this book? Can you identify a distinct narrative arc?
 - a. Why do you think the titles of these three particular poems were chosen as the section headers?
 - b. Why do you think 'Ahead of Us' was chosen as the title of the collection?



3. How is a strong sense of foreshadowing and foreboding achieved throughout this collection?
4. How are Chinese society and culture presented in the 'China Poems'? Compare and contrast depictions of setting, society and culture with those illustrated in the 'French Poems'.
5. How would you describe the persona's evolving concept of 'spirituality' or 'God' throughout this collection?
6. How does the poet use figurative language and symbolism to convey the themes of love, death and grief in any two poems of your choice?
7. What is your personal response to the final section/poem 'Fascination'? Do you feel that the book ends on an optimistic tone through this theme of rebirth (following the grief that pervades many of the poems within 'That Other Country')? Or does the pervading atmosphere remain one of sorrow for you? Turn to a partner and share.
8. During an interview Haskell said: 'I have a mission: partly to speak up for others who have gone through (or are going through) a cancer experience but do not have the verbal capacity to speak or write of it, and partly to publicise the situation with ovarian cancer.' Do you feel the book achieves his mission?
9. Which poem in this book spoke most powerfully to you and why?

Creative writing

1. The following quote appears on the dedication page: 'The things we shrink from are the things we make poetry out of.' Using Peter Porter's words as inspiration, write a free verse poem on a theme that you might ordinarily 'shrink' away from.
 - a. Invite students to workshop their poetry in groups of four, receiving constructive criticism from their peers and arriving at a final draft.
 - b. If students wish, these poems may then be gathered together to create a class collection (published on a class blog or school website, or printed and made available in your school library).
 - c. Additionally, you may wish to organise a class (or school) poetry recital, inviting students to read their work aloud.
2. The poem 'The Trees' (p. 15) presents, among other themes, the youthful questioning of one's purpose and the direction they may take in life: 'What are you doing here / racing through the uncontrolled landscape / of your life, all the stations / that will be given to you?' (ll. 12–15)
 - a. Take a moment to reflect on this question. Structure a creative response in any form you wish (free-verse poem; prose; visual artwork).
3. Using the following line as inspiration, write a free-verse poem or short story: 'Be prepared for danger / in times of safety.' (l. 19 in 'At the Marco Polo Hotel' p. 18)
4. Have students work collaboratively to create a class poem surrounding the theme: Love and Loss'.
5. Write a review of *Ahead of Us* for your classroom blog or school website. In your opinion, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the book? To whom would you recommend this work and why?

Essay topics/debate topics

In teams of three, critically argue for/against the following claims:

1. 'Poetry in our time is, I think, the most intimate of all the arts.' Dennis Haskell
2. 'Writing poetry depends more than writing prose on inspiration; it has a verbal and emotional intensity so that it concentrates on moments or single experiences.' Dennis Haskell
3. '... poetry's world is separate / though deeply connected / to reality.' (ll. 13–15 'Parallels and Antithesis' p. 73)
4. 'Ink fixed on paper / will never be the world, the richness we recall.' (ll. 21–22 'On not Flying' p. 34)
5. '...each attempt / at meaning is an act / of defiance of death.' (ll. 32–33 'An Act of Defiance' p. 36)
6. 'Death takes us into a realm that we are not built to deal with, and there is a sense that any death is equal to all deaths because numbers don't make sense there.' Dennis Haskell.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

This is your eighth collection of poetry. Of course, every volume must be personal, but this one feels particularly so. How do you feel about the publication of Ahead of Us?

Poetry in our time is, I think, the most intimate of all the arts, but this book is more intensely personal than any other I have published. To be honest, I am nervous about the publication, but I have a mission: partly to speak up for others who have gone through (or are going through) a cancer experience but do not have the verbal capacity to speak or write of it, and partly to publicise the situation with ovarian cancer. Not only is there no cure but there is still no reliable test for it, so it is sometimes described as 'a silent killer of women'.

I hope that people don't think that I'm being grandiose in using Wilfred Owen's famous comment as an epigraph to the second section. My poems record a personal tragedy while his recorded a much larger one. However, death takes us into a realm that we are not built to deal with, and there is a sense that any death is equal to all deaths because numbers don't make sense there. I wanted to indicate, as Owen did, that the area where the poems are trying to act makes literary considerations trivial. My nervousness about publication has nothing to do with what reviews of the book might be like; they seem irrelevant.

Is a volume like this the poet's version of a memoir? Does it feel to you like a fine way to mark and commemorate Rhonda's life?

No, I don't think it is a memoir. A memoir does not have to tell fully of a period in someone's life but it does have a flowing narrative, even if with interruptions. Writing poetry depends more than writing prose on inspiration; it has a verbal and emotional intensity so that it concentrates on moments or single experiences – such as pouring the cup of tea down the sink in 'Drinking' or receiving good news about the chemotherapy treatment in 'Who or Why or How or What'. It may be reflective of longer periods of time or of repeated experiences, as in the first three poems in the 'That Other Country' section, but that reflecting takes place in front of the reader. This poetry (I hope) has an immediacy which is part of its impact; on every reading you are experiencing the event at that moment. Memoir is reflection after the event.

I don't think the book is a very good commemoration of Rhonda's life; I don't think any book could be. Life is always much more than any of our representations of it, and Rhonda's life was a much larger, fuller and richer thing (if that's the right word) than anything words can sum up. Her life certainly enriched mine. Moreover, this book largely covers the end of her life (a phrase that saddens me to write). If you gathered together all the poems I have written about her over all my books that would be a better gesture towards commemoration. I had planned to put those poems together in an edition of one copy to give her on our wedding anniversary (it would have been our 40th) but she died four weeks beforehand, so she never knew about my plan; I still regret this deeply.

Some of these poems are deeply personal dispatches from 'That other country' as you have named cancer. How does it feel for you to perform these intimate pieces in public?

For some time after I had written the poems – and at that stage I had written only some of them – I could not read them in public. The first time I did so I read just one poem ('After Chemo', which was the second poem written) at Voicebox in Fremantle. I did so very uncertainly but it was met with a stunned silence, so I knew the poem had worked. There were a lot of women in the audience. I've since read some of the poems a few times, both in Australia and overseas, but there are some that I still cannot read aloud. I don't think I will ever be able to read the long poem that presents the last few days and hours that led to my wife's death.

Do you think that others may find their own stories and experiences in your own?

Oh, I really do hope so, although I'm sorry that anyone has to go through the experience. If some people find that it helps by voicing something like their own experience that will mean more to me than any favourable literary review. One of the poems was published in the WA Cancer Council newsletter and I hoped that helped some people.

Ahead of Us has a very deliberate three-part structure to it and, across the book, an identifiable narrative arc. At what point did you conceive of this volume, and what was the process of curating it like?

My books have alternated between being a simple run through of poems and being divided into sections; somehow I like the idea of this variation and some poems cluster in a thematic way that encourages the sectioning. I don't write with this in mind; they simply come out. It's when I have enough that I gather them together and sections might suggest themselves. That was true with this book but it does have a chronology following the events that isn't the case with my other books. It's obvious that a number of the poems were written after Rhonda's death. After she died I went on a pilgrimage to places that had mattered to her and to us; I was travelling alone and drafts of poems poured out of me.

I always had the book in three sections, with the last a single poem – written when I first met my grandson. He lives in Taiwan and was five months old; Rhonda never knew of him. This section is meant to bring us into new life. Rhonda would have liked that.

However, I had thought of the first section as just a miscellany of poems, rather than any narrative of our life before cancer, and I would never have contemplated republishing any earlier poems. For this concept I have to give great credit to Georgia Richter and Wendy Jenkins, the editors at Fremantle Press with whom I worked; they were extremely generous with their time and ideas. The concept came up with our meetings about the manuscript. I love the idea and just have my fingers crossed that readers who know my work approve!