

OF MEMORY AND FURNITURE

BRON BATEMAN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Of Memory and Furniture is described by Julianne van Loon as ‘a deeply feminist project’, and by David Brooks as ‘bold, explicit and unapologetic’. In four parts, this collection explores experiences of female embodiment, sexuality, and relationships with family, lovers and institutions. It is concerned with expressions of female sexuality in its myriad forms—heterosexual, lesbian, and experiences of non-normative sexuality—as well as issues of maternal subjectivity, mental health and abuse and, throughout, the role of memory in enabling healing. The poems are at once erotic and deeply thought through, intelligent and tender.

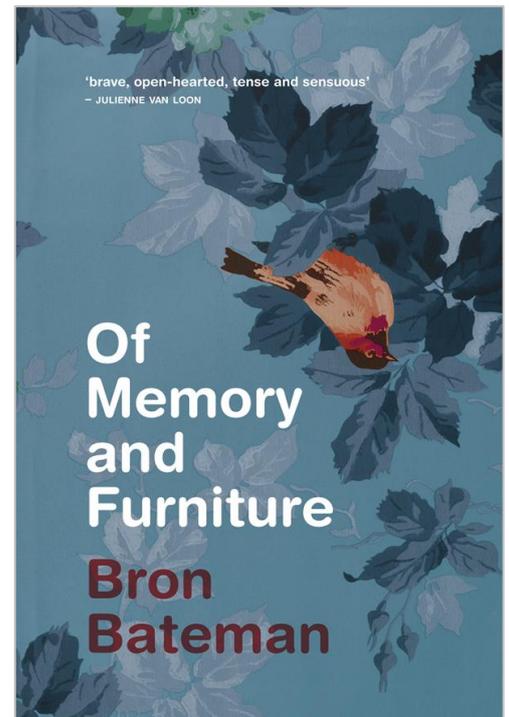
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bron Bateman is a poet, academic and mother of nine. She is a lecturer and unit coordinator in the enabling program ‘OnTrack’ at Murdoch University. Her research interests include cultural studies, creative writing, feminism, the body, and Gothic and gender theory. Her first poetry collection, *People from Bones* (with Kelly Pilgrim), was published in 2002. She has had her work published in collections and journals in Australia, the UK and the US.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These book club notes are a little different to others you may have encountered. They 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. In what ways is this book ‘a deeply feminist project’?
2. What potential do you see in the relationship between writing and memory?
3. When the poet takes control of difficult subject matter by shaping it into a poem, how does this change the relationship between trauma and subject, and between the speaker and memory? Possible poems to consider in light of this question are:
 - Beautiful Girl (p.15)
 - Language (p.27)
 - Talisman (p.83)
 - Of Memory and Furniture (p.86)
 - The Lemon Picker (p.88)
4. 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?
5. Why do you think the collection bears the title *Of Memory and Furniture*?
6. What is the relationship of the title to the jacket design?
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. Is there a poem you have written that you are prepared to share with somebody else? If there is, you could take turns to rewrite the poem by responding to the material in the draft before.
- Things to think about:
- Is there something that the poem is trying to say that is separate from the author's intentions?
 - What is the relationship between an original memory and a poem about that memory?
 - What is the relationship between poem and reader, and how does that differ from the relationship between the poet's memory and the poem?
- B. Choose a poem title from the contents page and use it as a prompt to write a poem with that title.
- C. Do you think that memories look different at different times in your life? Or do some always stay the same? If you could shape a memory via poetry, what would it be? What would be your intention in doing so?
- D. In what ways is the human body a poem? Where does memory reside, and how can these memories be used to create poetry? Can you attempt to write an 'embodied' poem?
- E. Can you write a response to one of the poems in this collection? It can be any poem, and the response can be positive, or negative, can use the poem as a launching pad, or to further the discussion of the themes of the collection, or of the individual poem. Afterwards, you might also write a short statement about your choice.
- F. Is this collection a journey or snapshots of different moments in time? Which poems make you think this?
- G. Does your opinion of the author change throughout the collection? Why or why not?
- H. What is the one poem you would choose to represent the whole collection? Why?
- I. If given the chance, what is the first question you would ask the author?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

This is a very carefully structured volume, but did the poems within develop more organically?

I often get fragments of the poem—a line or two—and then build the rest of the poem around them. For example, with the poem 'Needle Play' I was in the shower and the final lines just floated into my mind. I knew they were the final lines of the poem, and that I would have to write the rest of the poem to get to those lines. I then did the hard work to shape the poem as it needed to be written. Poetry is often a destination for me—a story that must be told. In recent times, I have made a conscious decision to 'show up at the page' and write for a set amount of time a few times a week. Doing this means that I am becoming more prolific and writing new poems every week. There is hard graft in getting the words on the page, but it is absolutely worth it.

I work hard on structuring my poems carefully, but the story is the important thing. This collection was for my creative PhD, and there were times when I was quite strict with myself—I had to write a piercing poem, for that section of my exegesis, for example, but often the poems were stories that were begging to be told. Many of them developed organically, but that doesn't mean that I don't do a great deal of prowling around each line and idea, to shape it into something that is as tightly structured and coherent as I can make it.

Why did you choose 'Of Memory and Furniture' as the title poem?

I believe profoundly that memory resides in the body. It is the interface between what happens to us, and how we experience it. I knew that the poem 'Of Memory and Furniture' would be the titular poem when I wrote it, as it was the clearest articulation in the collection of the relationship between what happens to the body, and where it happens, in space and time. This poem has concrete images—a man, a room, tiles, wallpaper, a small body. Those memories are cast in stone and memory alone can't be the articulation of that. And space alone can't be. You need both to concretise and complement the memory and to clarify it for the reader.

What do you see as the relationship between memory and writing?

Once, in response to Shakespeare's depiction of Richard III, somebody wrote that history is written by the victors. This made sense to me and I was determined to tell my own stories from the perspective of being a survivor. The relationship between memory and writing is a profound one for me. In the same way that something hasn't happened fully unless I've come home and told my wife about it, an event in my life doesn't have form and substance unless I have framed it into a poem. Because of my history of mental illness, I have had a difficult relationship with memory. There are vast blank spaces in my memory, and I have learnt through therapy that this is a response to childhood trauma. I am fortunate that I can craft a poem and lay down enough detail that the memory becomes complete, somehow, for me. With the writing I did in this collection, and the writing I am doing now, I am reclaiming my life from those blank spaces. And that means a great deal to me. There is safety in that.

What do you see as the role of the poet today?

The role of a poet today is to be a warrior. A proponent of truth.

I completed much of the work in this collection in 2012, but I was nervous about sending it out for consideration for publishing. Then Donald Trump was elected president, and I was so devastated about this. He represented everything I was against and spoke against everything that I embodied—my queerness, being an educated woman and a feminist, having mental illness, were who and what he derided and negated. There has been a silencing of so many voices in this current climate—women's voices, queer voices, voices of diversity—that I had to do something personally about this. I made a pledge to myself that I would start telling my stories, start sending out my work, start speaking my truth. That I would be unapologetic and proud of who I was and what I stood for. So that is what I did.

This is a longwinded way of saying that it has never been more important for diverse voices to be heard. Never a more important time to focus the creative lens on love, life, relationships, history, social justice, diversity and equality. I am writing more than I ever have before. Sending out more poems for consideration. I am also reading more than ever before. Reading difference, and alternative perspectives. As funding and the economy tighten up, and we are fighting from a smaller and smaller pot of funding we must find new and creative ways to get our stories told and heard. I believe that if even one person is affected by my writing, then I have been successful.



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