



**Age**  
**24/05/2008**  
**Page: 25**  
**A2**  
**Region: Melbourne**  
**Circulation: 207000**  
**Type: Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 303.71 sq.cms**  
**MTWTFSS-**

# Forget Xlebnikov, character explains the world

## The Australian Popular Songbook

By Alan Wearne  
 Giramondo Press, \$22

## Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful

By John Kinsella  
 Fremantle Press, \$24.95

ALAN WEARNE HAS BEEN part of the Australian poetry scene since the late 1960s and is known among readers for writing verse novels of epic scope, technical ambition and social complexity. He is also known for his use of the vernacular: so it's a grouse idea for his new collection, *The Australian Popular Songbook*, to include 28 poems based on popular songs, from the 1880s to the 1980s.

They feature a range of characters: an early-'60s union organiser; Wearne himself, in 1967; a Scottish migrant, adrift in suburbia; even Tim and Debbie (in *Who Listens to the Radio?*): "two against the world,/ chic, unique, alternative and martyred./ 'I've had enough suburban dregs to dredge./ ooooh mate you said it: we're the cutting edge!'"

For Wearne it is character that explains the world, and his language, in all its singularity and density, is ultimately the means to convey this truth. Wearne's characters, whatever their milieu, speak in his daggy-courtly argot, detailed with successive waves of Aussie lingo.

There are even times when he reads like a transplanted Betjeman; quite knowingly I would imagine: "After church the drive, the singsong: Dad in tenor mode/ winds the Vauxhall down Mount Dandenong Road;/ lulled, Mum's glad, these patterns still keep:/ Janet reading, Carol pulling faces, Margie asleep".

The book also includes poems

inspired by suburbs, which Wearne believes are just as Australian as the iconic Kakadu/Barrier Reef assortment. That may well be true but these poems are always more about people than place. In *Chatswood*, for example: "on our night to not-remember when, gentility set to prevail/ we headed three, four, five, six, up quite a low-key scale:/ Ken running the bar till midnight, not even a conga line,/ we crossed our arms as our parents might for the days of auld lang syne." The characters speak, and their social worlds are real. But the places themselves are mute and almost invisible.

The dense pea-souper of Wearne's particularity prevents you from seeing too much, which is fine: you just have to let the voice guide you. As it does, surely, ruefully, through the last, long poem, *Breakfast with Darcy*, a wistfully clear-eyed paean to a kind of leftness now consigned, ironically, to Trotsky's dustbin of history: "years later, Mike could tell me: 'Those days/ bred near-giants: Hardy mate, Waten, Morrison/ sure . . . but you . . . you were writing/ the history of our future. What happened, mate?'"

John Kinsella, on the other hand, is all about visibility: seeing and being seen. He is a prolific "international poet" who moves around the world effortlessly both in his poetry and in his person. His poems go everywhere and do everything. But they have as their launching point the Western Australian wheatbelt and forest region where he grew up: "From Mount Brown, the wheel of fortune:/ the compass fanning out/ to towns nearby, the city, Antarctica./ Kids do rococo burn-outs/ in the car park."

Kinsella sees with a penetrating eye the points where we meet the natural world: "The bird rings the changes; introducing a line,/ a

steady progression from head to neck to wings to tail./ with some angling in flight, a gradual variation: a black-shouldered kite/ or a twenty-eight parrot in its swinging voyage, slammed by a family sedan,/ ricocheting."

His poems fly up, seeking to draw in or illuminate vast reaches of culture and geography. He works the land just as hard and as determinedly as the wheat farmers or his forester forebears ever did — but leaves it intact.

Although he is a very modern poet in his style, language and life, there is something unashamedly 18th century about him: the book is called *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful*, after all. There are references to Burke, Chatterton, and Shelley, as well as directly to their classical antecedents: Some passages read like fragments of Greek lyric poetry: "Of the tongue things eaten make more words/ than words make food, but that's no reason/ we should succumb".

There are also plenty of contemporary references; to Hitchcock, the Borg, Leavis, AC/DC, and "those threatening foxes, dragging/ chunks of the dead around/ like what/ Jakobson said about Xlebnikov's syntax."

No, I don't know either: which is where Kinsella can be wearing. But he takes a huge run at each poem and then a great leap: you have to do likewise. Usually it's worth it.

The first Greek lyric poet, Archilocos, a soldier and a bastard, and even in his fragments a very concrete thinker, wrote in the eighth century BC: "The fox knows many tricks, but the hedgehog only one. A good one." He could easily have been talking about these two poets.

Peter Kenneally is a Melbourne poet

