

PURPLE PROSE

EDITED BY LIZ BYRSKI AND RACHEL ROBERTSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

Purple Prose is a collection of personal stories by fifteen Australian women writers who were invited to write about the colour purple. The significance of the colour to each of them comes in many forms: the coronation gown of King George VI, the Fremantle Dockers, pigeon fancying, playing with dolls. They give rise to themes of memory, identity, storytelling, feminism, grief, ageing, metamorphosis, celebration – the personal and the political – and they highlight the multiplicity of meanings that the colour purple can hold.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Liz Byrski is a writer, journalist and broadcaster based in Perth, Western Australia. She has published many works of fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent book with Fremantle Press is *In Love and War: Nursing Heroes*.

Rachel Robertson lectures in professional writing and publishing at Curtin University. Her fiction and essays have been published in *The Best Australian Essays*, *Australian Book Review*, *Griffith Review* and *Island*. She is the author of the memoir *Reaching One Thousand* and her essay of the same name was joint winner of the 2008 Calibre Prize.

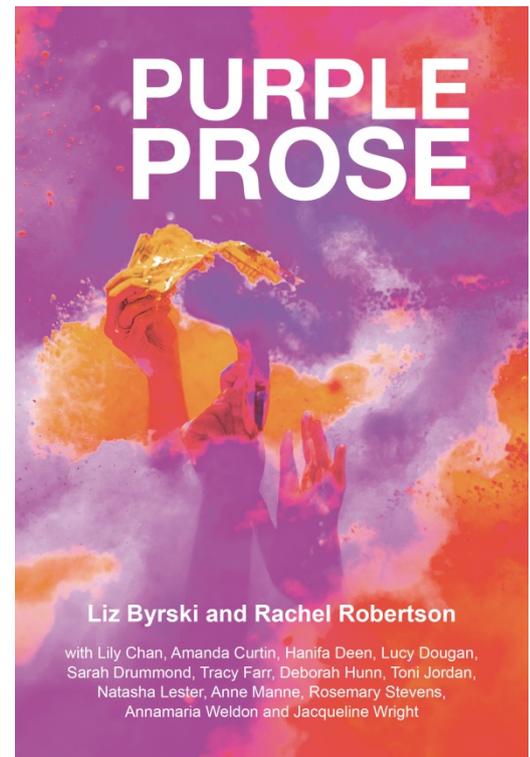
FROM THE EDITORS

What inspired you to ask a group of writers what the colour purple meant to them?

We've both always loved purple, and so when Rachel started talking to Liz about how she wanted to create a book about purple, Liz understood the impulse and came up with the idea of a women's anthology. Both of us felt a strong connection between the suffragettes, contemporary feminism, and purple, and so we both imagined that other women our ages would feel that connection too. But we wondered what younger women might feel about purple. And we knew also that people from different cultural backgrounds would be likely to view purple differently, so we felt that we would discover new things from editing this anthology. We were right about that! We had a lot of fun discussing our own ideas about purple. Rachel started to get interested in purple vegetables and cereals after seeing purple-wheat rolls in a shop and Liz suggested that she should cook a meal of only purple food. That idea didn't make it into the book, probably because Rachel is a terrible cook!

Were the resulting submissions what you expected, or were there some surprises?

We were excited and amazed when people's chapters came in to us to read. First of all, the diversity of responses to a single prompt really surprised us. And then there was the imaginative way the writers had interpreted the task. We'd never imagined someone writing about swearing or gender reassignment or pigeons. We did guess what some contributors would write about (the Dockers, for example, or spirituality, ageing or art), but then the particular angle they took surprised us. We were also surprised by the range of styles in the collection: some chapters are lyrical and allusive in style, others more expository. Some contributors added a lot of research background to their essays, others focused more on personal stories. The



novelists and poets seemed to adapt well to writing non-fiction, though many of them did mention that it was a challenge to have to stick more closely to reality than usual.

What is the value, do you think, in a collection of personal stories that focus on a theme?

Reading the anthology now, we're not sure that purple is the theme of the book so much as a starting point. The theme might be more about how each of us view the world through a particular lens and how we understand each other through stories. Starting from a single concept or word might have led to a more tightly constrained collection, but in this case we feel purple has opened up the collection to a wider range of stories than we could have imagined.

What might readers gain from this experience of reading 'bite-sized' pieces of memoir?

We hope that readers will primarily gain pleasure from reading the anthology. We hope they will be amused, informed and inspired. The short-form memoir is a form that Rachel particularly likes because it is a way that readers can enter into a moment from someone else's life and experience a kind of transformation, as the personal becomes universal. While each story is complete in itself, the 'bite-sized' length means that you can still be left with gaps or questions. You keep thinking afterwards as your mind drifts, wondering about what you read and linking it to your own life. In this way, a short work can be powerful and evocative.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In general

- What colour do you see when you think of the word *purple* (deep purple, violet, lilac etc ...)
- What does the colour purple mean to you?
- What is the effect of applying a theme (such as a colour) to a collection of life-writing?
- Different emphases are placed on the colour for different writers. Does it matter if in some of the pieces purple is a starting point only? Do all of the pieces manage to remain true to the editors' request?
- At what points does the personal become political in this collection?
- In which instances do you think the writer has been surprised by their own exploration of the theme?
- Why do you think the editors chose to order these stories in the way they have? Does this order make you 'receive' the package of the book in a particular way?
- Does the collection make you think / feel differently about the colour purple?
- Each of these pieces is a work of narrative non-fiction. Many of them deploy modes of fiction (scene, dialogue, characterisation) to deliver their message. How do we understand our lives and identities when can explore them through the mode of storytelling? How does this collection demonstrate different ways of doing this?

'The Things I Cannot Say' Natasha Lester

- “*‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,’ Simone de Beauvoir states in The Second Sex and the thinker in me understands the notion that gender is socially and culturally ascribed, whereas sex relates to the anatomical body one is born with.*” (p. 18) In what ways is Natasha Lester's story a personal one, and in what ways does it wrestle with the effect that society and culture can have on the author, her brother and her family?
- This is in many ways an intensely private story. What risks does the author take in telling it? What do you think her motivation is in sharing her and her brother's story?
- How does the structure of the story assist and enable the author's revelation?

- In what way is this a story about grieving, and in what way transformation?
- Why are some life transitions seen as rites of passage, while others constructed as invisible or condemned?

'Maiden Aunts' Liz Byrski

- What is a 'maiden aunt'? Is it a term that still has resonance today?
- What does Violet's purple room symbolise? What is the effect on this meaning that its occupier's name is Violet?
- What was the effect on society of having a *surplus two million* women after the Great War (p. 29)? How do the author's own aunts represent different paths open to some of this women, and as a microcosm of this surplus?
- How has the author's view of her maiden aunts shifted over time? What do you think has been her motivation in telling their story?
- In what ways does it 'help' to have written it down?

'Blue Meat and Purple Language' Toni Jordan

- *How is language coloured by emotion? Why do some words carry more power than others?*
- What is the effect of someone deliberately choosing to vary their lexicon so that they stand out from those around them? Is this an act of courage or folly – or something else?
- What difference would it make if Jordan had written this story about her father rather than her mother?
- How has Jordan's perception of her mother shifted across time?
- How has her mother's own language choices changed, and what do these transitions tell us?

'Into the Whipstick' Anne Manne

- If the mother is on a journey into old age, then so is her daughter. What has Manne learned from being witness to her mother's increasing dependence and frailty?
- What are the phases of motherhood we see in this piece?
- What is the relationship between caring and time?
- What is the role of the care foot soldier?
- As some things are lost, then others are gained. What gifts have the author and her mother received during the ageing process?
- In what ways is this piece political?

'Velvet' Rachel Robertson

- Memoir itself ... is as much a *mapping of a mind* as the recreation of experience (p. 65). In what ways does the author foreground the act of writing memoir in her memoir piece?
- How do imagination and memory work together in remembering the purple dress?
- Do you think that remembering is privileged over forgetting in our culture? What is the value of that negative space, the realm of the forgotten?
- In what ways is the act of writing an act of recovery?
- In what ways does this narration create something new?
- How has the author used purple in this piece as a binding device? Is it a key element of her story?

'Is a Magnificent Story': Interviews with Pigeon Fanciers' Sarah Drummond

- This story is less 'personal' than some of the others, though the author Drummond is present. What is her motivation in telling the tale she does?
- How is her own voice integral to the story?
- What do we learn from each of the characters – and what is their connection to the colour purple?
- How is Dante a storyteller in his own right? And Ray? What is the importance of handing such stories down, even to a stranger like Sarah Drummond, who one might say has found these men through serendipity?
- If this is a story about pigeons and purple, why has she included the tale of the Kalgoorlie race riots?

'Do You See What I See?' Tracy Farr

- In contrast to the Drummond story, this is a much more self-reflective piece, a chance to consider her own writing life. What is the relevance of the title of the piece to the story Farr tells?
- How does the question of 'what is colour' assist her own preoccupations as a writer?
- What do Farr's reflections on colour and attempts to organise the spectrum say about language more broadly?
- What is the relationship between science and art, and what can each give the other?
- Synaesthesia, colour-blindness, macular degeneration: these are all elements of sight and seeing discussed by the writer – but in what way are they useful metaphors too?

'Mary' Lucy Dougan

- How does the colour purple play itself out through Dougan's piece? What is the effect of her structuring her story this way?
- What is the importance to this author of 'walking back to Mary', and what is the relationship between Dougan and her ancestor?
- What has she gained through her relationship (the act of being related) to her famous aunt Dorothy Hewett?

- *Sometimes to see a woman's story it is best to look upside down, arse about etc* (p. 101). Do you agree with the author here? What is she saying about how women narrate their lives and how to understand these narratives?
- Is there something particularly gendered in this story of fabric, poetry and jacaranda flowers? How are these items connected to acts of creation?
- How is female self-expression constructed in this piece?

'The Trouble with Purple' Annamaria Weldon

- *That colour will bring you nothing but trouble* (p. 108). In what way does this statement set up a theme or a refrain?
- What relations exist between purple and religion in this story?
- How does this story negotiate ancestry, memory, cultural heritage? What other pieces in the collection also do the same?
- The turning points in Weldon's life *have a colour signature* (p. 110). How has colour helped frame the way that the author receives and frames the world?
- Why do you think Anna draws a link between life events and colour?
- How does she foreground her own vocation as a writer in the story that she tells?

'The Red and Blue: Confessions of an (Unlikely) Dockers Fan' Deborah Hunn

- In what way is Hunn's reflection a 'confession'?
- How is footy and fandom a useful vehicle for a personal / political contemplation?
- How does the purple theme enable Hunn to explore questions of identity – both personal and cultural – and questions of belonging?
- What tensions and parallels are between, say gay pride, pride for one's team, and the traditionally macho / male culture of football? Does footy culture reflect, advance, or condense the culture of broader Australian society?
- What does the reader learn about what it is like to be an Aussie Rules footy supporter who is gay? How does one mode of identification inform the other?

'The Two Loves' Lily Chan

- How are travel, spirituality and colour integrated in this chapter? What does their fusion suggest?
- What is the nature of Chan's spiritual journey and why does she begin with a memory from when she was three?
- How has Chan deployed purple to tell her story – and what is it that she wants to tell us?
- What picture of Australian life does she paint?
- *More than a decade later and this all seems innocuous; these teenage attempts to pass various examinations of the spirit, to graduate from ignorant acolyte to illumined being, the continual self-progression and inquiry* (p. 137). Is Chan apologising for her youthful visions, or is she doing

something else in sharing them with us?

- What meaning might there be for Chan to find in a world where there is *vacancy of meaning* (p. 137)?

'Purple Impressions' Rosemary Stevens

- What defined the Impressionist movement? In what ways was their use of colour unique? What is it that Stevens wants us to see through such a detailed consideration of Impressionism? How do the paintings give shape to her own life?
- Stevens refers to purple as a *liminal shade and threshold between worlds* (p. 142). How does this establish a useful metaphorical framework for the personal story she has to tell?
- How does art in this piece inform her story and how (and what) does it help us to understand about the art?
- In what ways is this story a story as much about colour and technique as it is about finished pieces?
- What correlations are there between the piece by Tracy Farr and this one by Rosemary Stevens? Why is it useful for writers to write about art?

'Bruised' Jacqueline Wright

- What are the role and associations of the colour purple in Wright's story?
- How does she select and discard different metaphors and symbols and how does this help her move on?
- How would you describe the narrative shape of this piece and its trajectory?
- How important is it to the author that she can 'make stories' of her life? What role can narrative play in healing?
- A number of pieces in this collection are confessional pieces from fiction authors, like this one (and like Lester and Curtin). What risks does the author take when she chooses to tell a personal story that is also 'true'? Is she more exposed than when she explores the same things within fiction?
- What difference does it make to the reader if we are reading fiction or non-fiction in the way we receive the story and the 'character'?

'My Descent into Purple' Hanifa Deen

- In what ways does this author *descend* into purple? How is colour a useful frame for her tale?
- How does this piece trace shifts in consciousness, on a personal and historical level?
- Why does the author interpose play-like scenes and quotations in her piece?
- What is it that Deen admires in the women she celebrates as 'disobedient'? How has this outlook informed her own decisions?
- What is the point of intersection for this author of herself and feminism?

'Towards Metamorphosis' Amanda Curtin

- Why have the editors chosen to end the collection with a story about metamorphosis?
- What form does metamorphosis take in this story?
- Curtin reveals scenes of excruciating self-consciousness and unwelcome exposure. What do you make of the fact she has chosen to lay them all out again on the page? Does it compound or ease her situation? Does it add irony to her tale?
- This author uses some key images – red hats, a tattoo, a cheese platter – as a vehicle for her themes. What do you think each of them means in the context of this piece?
- How does this story move between a personal account and an inquiry into social expectations? What is the relationship of age to each of these?



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