



Porter, Dorothy (1954-2008)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Dorothy Porter with Wylan, her cat, in 2005. Image courtesy Dorothy Porter.

Brash, political, sexy, and, above all, comprehensible, the work of Australian lesbian poet Dorothy Porter presents a cheeky challenge to a literary establishment whose poetry has often been defined by pretension and obfuscation. While her innovative "verse novels" owe a debt to the lusty epic adventures of ancient writers such as Homer, Virgil, and Chaucer, Porter's work is uproariously modern, even when she is exploring ancient subjects, such as the inner life of the renegade Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten or the pagan rhythms of Minoan Crete.

Porter's quest to wrest poetry from the elite and return it to the common reader was rewarded with both popular success and also recognition from the literary world. In a 1999 report for the Australian Broadcasting Company, journalist Kate Torney summed up the poet's contribution, "Dorothy Porter has dragged poetry back into the mainstream."

Dorothy Featherstone Porter was born March 26, 1954 in Sydney, Australia, the oldest of three daughters of Chester Porter, a well-known criminal lawyer, and Jean Featherstone Porter, a chemistry teacher. Reared in Sydney, the Porter children spent much of their childhood on the city's northern beaches and in the nearby Blue Mountains. Chester and Jean Porter were avid birders, and from them young Dorothy learned the patient art of bird watching and a love of nature that inspired and is reflected in her poetry.

Porter began keeping a journal at an early age, and, by the time she was fourteen, had decided to become a writer. Also during her childhood, she began falling in love with women, though she developed romantic relationships with men as well. She was contentedly bisexual until she was thirty-one, when she came out as a lesbian.

Among the writers who influenced her as a young poet were the Americans William Carlos Williams, Robert Duncan, Frank O'Hara, and Elizabeth Bishop, and the Russians Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.

In 1975, Porter graduated from Sydney University and published her first volume of poetry, *Little Hoodlum*, a collection filled with rich images of the natural world and the human passion for connection. Although *Little Hoodlum* was followed by other published volumes--*Bison* in 1979, *The Night Parrot* in 1984, and *Driving Too Fast* in 1989--and Porter acquired a following, like most poets she was forced to seek other work to support herself.

While continuing to develop her poetic art, she taught classes, becoming a poetry and writing lecturer at Sydney's University of Technology. She also tried her hand at fiction for young adults, publishing two mildly successful novels: *Rockwood* (1991) and *The Witch Number* (1993).

In 1991, Porter took an innovative leap with the publication of the verse novel *Akhenaten*, a dreamy and sensual imagining of the psyche of the rebel Egyptian pharaoh who worshipped the disk of the sun.

Though *Akhenaten* was popular with both critics and readers, it was Porter's second verse novel, *The*

Monkey's Mask (1994), that revolutionized poetry's place in Australian popular literature and established her reputation.

Though the eroticism and earthy pagan imagery of Porter's earlier work had resonated with lesbian readers, *The Monkey's Mask* brought her lesbian consciousness into the foreground for the first time. Written in the form of a long collection of interconnected poems, *The Monkey's Mask* is a *noir*-style detective novel, complete with hardboiled lesbian detective, irresistible femme fatale, and ominous plot twists.

Jill Fitzpatrick, Porter's dyke gumshoe, narrates with a wounded cynicism that is only made more powerful by the driving economy of the verse form.

The Monkey's Mask is a lushly erotic book. Jill is drawn helplessly into an affair with a prime suspect, and reels with the unexpected passion:

You forget

you get old and blunt
you forget what it's like

her taste on my mouth
her smell on my hands

the cops should pick me up
I can't walk a straight line.

Porter also manages to sneak in some scathing satire of the pretensions of Sydney's poetry elite, as Fitzpatrick tracks a missing poet through the words of her poems and the cocktail parties of the intelligentsia:

 Diana warned me
about poetry readings

"They're only supposed to read
for fifteen minutes,
you'll learn
Einstein's Theory of Relativity
firsthand, my dear,
fifteen minutes can stretch
like an old rubber band."

The Monkey's Mask was an immediate success, especially delighting queer audiences. It became *The Age* Poetry Book of the Year in 1994 and won the National Book Council's Banjo Poetry Prize in 1995. The novel was adapted as a stage play and a film directed by Samantha Lang. The success of *The Monkey's Mask* enabled Porter to support herself by her writing.

Porter continued to create verse novels, including *What a Piece of Work* (1999), the anguished story of a psychiatrist gone mad, and *Wild Surmise* (2002), a lesbian science fiction novel about the exploration of outer space and inner consciousness. *Wild Surmise* won the Adelaide Festival Awards John Bray Memorial Prize for Poetry in 2004 and became the first Australian book to win the South Australian Premier's Award for Literature and for Poetry.

In April 2007, Porter published another verse novel, *El Dorado*, a dark and enigmatic thriller about two childhood friends trying to find a suburban child murderer.

During the early 1990s, Porter moved to Melbourne to live with novelist Andrea Goldsmith. The couple supported each other's endeavors and even edited each other's work. In May 2003, they had the unusual distinction of both being shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, one of Australia's most prestigious literary honors.

Porter was a prolific and versatile writer who, in addition to eight books of poetry and five verse novels, wrote libretti for two operas, *The Ghost Wife* (2000) and *The Eternity Man* (2003), both by composer Jonathan Mills. She also wrote song lyrics and has contributed to and edited several anthologies.

Porter's work often confronts a wide range of spiritual and political issues, including class, gender, animal rights, and the environment. However, her most heartfelt crusade was in service of the art of poetry itself, and the importance of clarity.

In April 2001, at the Australian Poetry Festival, Porter gave a lecture titled, "Lucidity: The Poetry of Making Sense," in which she spoke of several great poets whose work had been censored, making the point that many of her own works have been making for decades, "To be taken really seriously, to be truly shocking, a poem has to be understood."

When she died on December 8, 2008, of complications arising from breast cancer, she was mourned not only by her close survivors--her partner Andrea Goldsmith, her parents, and her two sisters--but also by the entire Australian arts community.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.