

‘A cosmic kind of meaning-making’: A Review of Mike Ladd and Cathy Brooks’s *dream tetras*

Heather Taylor Johnson

Reviewed: *dream tetras*, Mike Ladd and Cathy Brooks, Wakefield Press

To open with the opening:

‘dream tetras’

That phrase comes to me first in the dream, followed by a set of instructions issued in a calm, matter-of-fact voice:

1. Write down the words heard in the dream.
2. Describe what was happening in the dream when the words were heard.
3. Record anything that connected with the words in your waking life that day.
4. Enter the dream phrase into an internet search engine and see what you find. (6)

The abruptness of the introduction is exciting. As readers, we get an immediate sense that we’re about to enter something slightly surreal yet very grounded, and there’s a good possibility it’ll be experimental. It continues:

It’s all very precise; a kind of manual for essay writing from the unconscious. There are no visions in the dream; the words come in blackness with just the merest slivers of red and electric blue swimming somewhere at the edges. (6)

Truly, all those semicolons point to something out of the ordinary. On the page opposite, eleven brightly coloured fish swim through a backdrop of blue tie-dyed fabric hanging in a window, shadowy prayer flags above them, a crumpled blue blanket — woollen perhaps — below. Thus we are introduced to the first dream tetra, in which poet and presenter Mike Ladd invites us into his home, where he makes a cup of tea then types ‘dream tetras’ into Google, as per his

instructions. What follows is a convivial flow from 'Tetris Effect' to 'My Dream Tank', and Ladd bestowing us with definitions, memories, considerations on how to live, until suddenly he's staring at an old fish tank under the porch. The tank used to hold tetra fish, which 'must have been the bright little slivers of red and blue at the edge of the original dream.' (9)

What Ladd does in all twenty-four of these one to three page-long dream tetras is highlight the act of noticing. Poets such as himself are always trying to notice, or more specifically, notice *better*, but this process gives noticing, literally, a new dimension. Incorporating the dreamworld into noticing implies a cosmic kind of meaning-making, or at the very least, a triumph of the subconscious, and both are excellent fodder for a collection of very short lyric essays with accompanying digital artwork.

The photos by Cathy Brooks — who is Ladd's life partner and artistic collaborator — are bold and nostalgic, often presented as collage, which fits the perceived brief of 'definitions, memories and considerations on how to live.' Dreams are frequently collaged, as is the process of generating connections, both at the core of this exceedingly original book, *dream tetras*. Printed on matt art stock paper in 230 mm x 190 mm measurements, it's a stunning visual artifact. Wakefield Press has never been shy about producing art books that look like art.

Both artwork and text are as philosophical as the concept itself, with contemplations of death, loneliness, the archives and truth-telling, memory, emojis, drones and birds, each finding their way to the likes of Rilke, Tennyson, Wallace Stevens, Philip Larkin. I remember the author reading some of these pieces in 2015 at Ken Bolton's always anticipated and splendidly curated Lee Marvin readings in Adelaide. What a great amount of time has passed between then and now; clearly philosophising doesn't happen in a snap of the fingers, especially if one must wait for their dream to instruct them on the day's writing. There's something about the completed product of a long-term project which starts and stops over many years, that has a simmering quality to it, a powerful bubbling entirely and satisfyingly controlled. *dream tetras* is this.

Heather Taylor Johnson writes novels, poetry, essays and arts reviews on Kaurana land. She is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the JMCCCP and the editor of *Shaping the Fractured Self: Poetry of Chronic Illness and Pain*. Alongside winning *Island's* Nonfiction Prize, recent shortlistings include the Red Room Poetry Fellowship and *ABR's* Calibre Prize.

Review: *Mike Ladd and Cathy Brooks's dream tetras* by Heather Taylor Johnson

Works Cited

Ladd, Mike, and Cathy Brooks. *dream tetras*. Wakefield Press, 2022.