

MORE 'MANN ALIVE'

Review of *Home from Home* for SA PEN Newsletter.

Home from Home: New and Selected Poems offers a comprehensive collection of work by one of South Africa's long-standing poets. Placed recently fourth on the list in the race for the distinguished position of Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, Chris Mann has, since 1977, published twelve individual volumes of poems. Taken together, these represent a steady output of well-crafted and innovative verse. *Home from Home* is, in part, an important retrospective on his earlier work and, in another way, a showcase for poems collected for the first time.

In a South African publishing environment well-known for slim, and often even ultra-slim, volumes from the hands of poets who spring up overnight like mushrooms soon to wither and to be seen no more, Mann's book reflects a substantial achievement. What he has put together here is not something that can be achieved in a month, in a year, or even in ten years. It is, quite simply, the fruit of a lifetime's commitment to the art of poetry. English is this poet's mother tongue and this is abundantly evident in the extent and subtlety of his vocabulary, in his finely nuanced phrases, and in the idiomatic assurance of his lines. The mainline tradition of English poetry has been fully absorbed into his sensibility and has been put to the purpose of writing poems in and about the South Africa of which he is a loyal citizen. He does not shy away from fellow South Africans of differing backgrounds, but rather actively embraces their uniqueness which includes their languages and modes of expression.

If it is necessary for any poet of consequence to have a distinctive voice, Mann has clearly satisfied this requirement. Whether he is writing about denizens of the natural world ('The Bees in the Wheatland of Genadendal'), local people he has met ('Victorians in the Provinces') or the constant change in scientific theorizing ('The Mutability of Science'), this writer has his own unmistakable register of cognition and feeling. His work makes no secret of the fact that he operates within the framework of a particular faith system, and this in itself adds intriguing associations to his viewpoint on almost any subject. His belief that there is, ultimately, a redemptive sub-text to all things gives a fresh and positive spin to his verses. As a person concerned with ethical values, Mann does not allow his work to sink into relativism. He can incline to the didactic, but is hardly ever domineering or pietistic. To recall the witty title of one of his early volumes, this poet is, indeed, *Mann Alive*. *Home from Home: New and Selected Poems*

I believe that *Home from Home* will provide an enlarging reading experience to poetry lovers in this country and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. I like the way in which the table of contents organizes the individual poems into an A to Z of subjects, ranging, for example, from A for Animals, to F for Fossils and W for Words. Such sub-headings affirm the wide range of Mann's interests, as do the titles of individual poems collected under each of them. Mann's imagination is as likely to be stirred by 'Daffodils, Pumpkins and the Moon' as by 'A Contemplation of the Soul', 'Compost' and 'Mandela's Cell.' Illustrations by the artist, Julia Skeen, complement texts which, taken together, show a rich understanding of life's paradoxes. This may be summed up by what Mann asks in 'Epiphanies.' 'Who ever grew wise/without sorrow?' 'Whoever loved/until they 'd trusted enough/ to bleed?' and 'who understood/until they'd shivered/in terror at their ignorance?'

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