

Australian Dark Fantasy & Horror Volume 3 (Angela Challis, ed)

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Brimstone Press February 2009 ISBN 9780980567700 The subtitle of Australian Dark Fantasy and Horror Volume Three (ADF&H Vol 3) promises readers "The Year's Best Short Stories", and the anthology delivers on that promise with aplomb, many of the pieces being of world standard. There are highs and lows, as with all anthologies, but overall, there's no denying that Ditmar award winning editor Angela Challis has yet again managed to pull together a strong and impressive garland. Challis has a proven track record in editing the ADF&H series, as well as establishing and editing Black: Australian Dark Culture Magazine (originally in print format, now an e-zine titled Eye of Fire), and editing the Shadowed Realms e-zine. Under the banner of WA independent press Brimstone Press, Challis and her partner Shane Jiraiya Cummings have been publishing fiction and non-fiction in print and online since 2004.

ADF&H Vol 3 opens with an immensely informative, well researched and valuable overview of the last year or two in Australian dark fiction. Coupled with appendices on dark fiction resources and Australian genre fiction awards, these extra touches set ADF&H Vol 3 well apart, not only as a formidable collection of fiction, but as a comprehensive market and genre resource. Nestled between the non-fiction elements lurk fifteen stories by talented Australian authors. There is no theme to the selection, other than darkness and excellence – both of which are abundant.

The cover is eye-grabbing and professional; I was proud to brandish it on the tram on my way home from work for all my fellow commuters to goggle at. My favourite story was Anna Tambour's The Jeweller of Second-Hand Roe, which had me literally open-mouthed in awe and appreciation, both at the thrilling and unique story, and the sheer brilliance of Tambour's prose, which is a sort of lilting insanity conveyed with pretty and perfect skill. Other particularly strong and disturbing pieces included Between the Memories by Matthew Chrulew, There was Darkness by Martin Livings, and Lion's Breath by Miranda Siemienowicz. Richard Harland's Special Perceptions is worth a mention for the powerful ending alone. I don't often enjoy stories told in journal format, but Harland's piece proved the exception to that rule, especially after I read the final line.

There are no weak stories in the collection, only good and very good, the interpretation of which will come down to each reader's individual tastes. I did notice typos throughout the volume – a pet hate of mine - with the final story (David Conyers's Subtle Invasion) containing so many that I found it difficult to read at times. This is unfair to Conyers as the story itself is a good one – unnerving, horrific, and well written. The Ringing Sound of Death on the Water Tank by Stephanie Campisi might have been the most successfully disturbing of them all, had it not ended right where it seemed the climax should be. I felt similarly about Rick Kennett's The Dark and What it Said. Aside from that, like all of the best pieces in the anthology, Campisi and Kennett's tales wormed under my skin and unsettled me in all the right ways.

ADF&H Vol 3 is an unmissable collection of highly enjoyable and skillfully written stories. Connoisseurs of the darkly beautiful, the disturbing and sinister, and the unflinchingly shocking will all find gems in this anthology. Lovers of fantasy, too, will travel to imaginative locations with this collection. It is not only a book for readers out for a good time – though it is that, and more – but also a book for writers interested in seeing how excellent wordsmiths work their craft. The best anthology I've read all year.

Angela Challis and Brimstone Press can be found online at <http://www.brimstonepress.com.au/> .