

## Shadow Box 2 by Shane Jiraiya Cummings

Contributed by Ross Murray  
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Brimstone Press: 2009 Shadow Box 2: Black Box, a sequel to Brimstone Press's 2005 release Shadow Box, consists of two discs — the e-anthology multimedia CD-ROM and a music CD. The CD-ROM contains flash fiction of less than 200 words — with the exception Bryn Sparks's comic The Orpheus Project — by eighty Australian and international writers both well-known and not. The Australian contingent is really a who's who of local spec-fic including Lucy Sussex, Lyn Battersby, Stephen Dedman, Robert Hood, and Richard Harland, to name a few. All the stories are supplemented with art loosely connected with the story's theme and some are also accompanied by "sound bites" — a baby's giggle, sound of crackling fire, howling wind — that relate to the story's theme or setting. These for the most part are fairly generic and don't really add much to the individual tales.

Also on the CD-ROM are songs from eleven bands. The music is recorded and performed to a broadcast standard, i.e.: these aren't demos provided as an afterthought. It's definitely the kind of music I like consisting of heavy metal (Empyrean, Frankenbok, Temujin, The Eternal, Pathogen), Gothic (Dandelion Wine, Opera Macabre, Virgin Black, Talie Helene) esoteric folk (Wendy Rule), with a some Aussie hip-hop (4th Wall) thrown in for good measure. (Note: Empyrean appears on the CD-ROM but not the music CD.) There are also embedded music videos of some of the songs on the CD-ROM which is very cool and shows just what can be done with a project like this. Of the music The Eternal's "Everlasting" and Frankenbok's "What is Real?" are standout tracks. Interspersed with the music and stories are seven artist portfolios offering a selection of digital, fantasy, darkly comic, and abstract art. The dark and surrealistic images of Emily Steigerwald, reminiscent of James Gleeson, were the most appealing to this reviewer. Regarding the fiction, it is difficult to pinpoint standout stories. The nature of flash fiction is that it is really over in flash. In fact fiction this short really has to act like a joke, with a punch line providing the twist in the very short tail. Achieving this is no mean feat but these stories deliver in spades. Without the need to fill space with words, the stories are distilled to a fine purity by the restricted word count. The authors have really outdone themselves and, I suspect, in some instances let themselves go to places they'd not been before. Some stories are downright chilling, painting vivid moments of despair, rage, and chaos. Others cover some very bleak and disturbing territory — deals with devils, prayers answered in twisted miracles, murderous family tragedies — Shadow Box has them all. Perhaps the brevity of the medium facilitates this, allowing authors to brush briefly with unsettling subjects like infanticide, incest, and cannibalism. These are themes that are perhaps best digested in the space of 100-200 words allowing us to quickly move on. This really must have been a mammoth project to bring together: kudos to Shane Jiraiya Cummings for the effort. However, there are some technical problems which let the package down. There is nothing on the front (or back for that matter) which tells the buyer what Black Box contains. The liner notes on the inside back cover would've been served better on the front of the case, if not then at least the back. While the musicians/bands are listed in the liner notes, there is no specific track listing on the CD. The track listing is supplied on the e-anthology CD-ROM but this isn't really helpful if you've only got one CD/DVD drive (like on a laptop). I assumed that the order which the musicians/bands are listed in the liner notes is the order that they appear on the disc but I assumed wrong. Neither is the band name/song title information embedded on the disc so there's no joy there either. The disc information came up in Windows Media Player as "Unknown album" with "Unknown Artist" attributed to "Track one", "Track two", etc. That means that when listening, there's no easy reference to see who is playing. Unfortunately in an era where everyone wants information straight away this isn't good enough. This really is a major oversight, almost unforgivable. Some disc mastering is in order too. Track nine is WAY, WAY LOUDER than the other tracks which may cause a problem for your stereo speakers if not your ears. The e-anthology contents pages provide the order of stories, art, and songs separately but no page numbers. This is fine if you want to read from start to finish. I didn't. Today's audience wants — and expects — the flexibility to view content any way they want. For example, after watching Virgin Black's video for "Our Wings are Burning" I wanted to see if there were any other embedded videos (there are — Wendy Rule's "Half Life" and Empyrean's "Pleasure of Another's Pain") which meant I had to search for each band using the page viewer. Similarly, if you want to read your favourite authors first, or compare artworks, you have to go searching. Very annoying. Surely hyperlinking the story on the contents page to the actual page in the anthology would've been advisable, if doing away with page numbers. For \$12.95 Black Box is great value. Unfortunately the production problems mentioned take some of the gloss of what is essentially an outstanding selection of writing, music, and art. The concept, content, and effort are fantastic, but the fabric is a little frayed around the edges. Or rather, it was not properly woven in the first place. To find out more about Shadow Box 2: Black Box go to <http://www.brimstonepress.com.au>.