

## **Sputnik's Cousin**

Kent MacCarter

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*Reviewed by Michael Gillan Maxwell*

*Sputnik's Cousin* is Kent MacCarter's third collection of poetry. Initially, I found the writing as confounding as Australian Football and every bit as rambunctious, rough and rowdy. It's a dense and unconventional mixture of prose and poetry, often abstract, with many unfamiliar historical references. I often found myself scrambling outside of my comfort zone and blindly groping for points of reference, concerned that I must be missing an inside joke.

Once I stopped wriggling madly, struggling to understand the meaning of every word, image or turn of phrase, I surrendered to the experience and just let it wash over me. MacCarter plays with language, form and syntax in a unique and experimental fashion that is not always easily accessible. Engaged readers need to do much of the heavy lifting. Here's a taste.

(from) *Zoo Break*

*Freed a binturong*

*accelerated its wave*

*exquisitely in cosines*

*quelching car radios*

*and plots of gibberish*

*replacing the news*

Kent MacCarter is an American expat, now a permanent resident of Australia, living and working in Melbourne. He was raised in the United States, and even though the lexicon of American English is native to him, his writing is heavily influenced and flavored by Australian English, with its uniquely musical vocabulary, syntax, idioms, and quirky expressions. (“arse,” “Christ-load,” “dunebuggery,” “spooks your cookies”)

His use of idiomatic language and experimentation with structure, form, line breaks and enjambment connects his work solidly to the lineage of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, John Cage, jazz, surrealism, abstract expressionist painting and assemblage sculpture.

MacCarter's nuanced and multi-layered and full of vitality and brilliant imagery. *Sputnik's Cousin* is also a cousin to *L-a-n-g-u-a-g-e Poetry* and this book demands that the reader stretch in new and unexpected ways. Here's another freewheeling riff.

(from) *XXIII. THE FIRST ESCALATOR IN CAMBODIA*

*Narrow gauge choo-choos haystacked with cloud books*

*dodder on ... bloodbath tracks to Battambang*

*hoppers-on nap near, mime. Doodlebugs en-*

*tangle gyroscopes. Shot, their scurries like ... (con't.)*

Kent MacCarter's poetry is diverse and wildly experimental; with language that gushes forth in dense torrents. Perhaps the poems that best epitomize the spirit and audacity of this book are found in *Beiderbecke*, a series of poems about Bix Beiderbecke, the mercurial, red-hot jazz musician of the 1920's. The *Beiderbecke* poems are also good examples in which spacing and formatting interacts with the white space on the paper in a way that connects it to music and visual art.

(from) *Revisiting Bixology (Volumes 9-11) in Beiderbecke*

*When Bix got volcanic*

*When Bix got his 'self revving*

*The mud he slid*

*a Mississippi through April*

*The oomph that horn throttled*

*you in yaw, pitch and roll*

*like a Bleriot's physics*

*during a Channel cross*

*Flight – the way Bix piloted*

*That cottontail rag*

Kent MacCarter's literary ancestry can be traced back to Nelson Algren, James Wright and Philip Levine; and their gritty, blue collar, realist influence is discernable

in the two sections of nonfiction prose, *Fat Chance and Pork Town*, that depict, among other things, historical plane crashes and slaughterhouses.

An undercurrent of wickedly wry humor runs through much of the work in *Sputnik's Cousin*. Some of the pieces defy description and conventional understanding, chuffing away like fulminating steam punk contraptions with connecting pipes and valves that whistle and wheeze, chitter, chirp and cheep, threatening to blow up at any moment.

His stream of consciousness romps, some pensive, some raucously playful, some mordantly funny, are acrobatic combinations of words and images in a private language that create a sense of cognitive dissonance, tear down established literary boundaries, defy labeling and challenge preconceived notions. *Sputnik's Cousin* is a significant body of ground breaking, modernist work from an important Australian poet and this is a book worthy of critical attention as a bellwether signaling trends in contemporary literature.

<http://www.transitlounge.com.au>

***Bio:***

**Michael Gillan Maxwell** is a writer and visual artist in the Finger Lakes Region of New York state. Maxwell writes short fiction, poetry, songs, essays, recipes and irate letters to his legislators and his work has been featured in a number of journals and anthologies. He serves as associate flash fiction editor for *JMWW* quarterly. A teller of tales and singer of songs, he's prone to random outbursts, may spontaneously combust or break into song at any moment and might be occasionally found ranting and raving on his website: [Your Own Backyard](#).