

MARGIE JENKIN

SHARYN MUNRO – *THE WOMAN ON THE MOUNTAIN* EXISLE PUBLISHING, 2007

Meet Sharyn Munro, *The Woman on the Mountain*. Ninety minutes drive from the nearest post box, Munro lives up a steep, unsealed road near a national park, surrounded by wild country. Her landscape extends beyond gently stepped revegetating shelves and gullies, to far ridges of eucalypt and patches of ancient Antarctic beech forests in the Hunter Valley. A declared wildlife refuge, Munro's land is a regenerating haven, with over 600 young plants ('her babies') grown from hand-collected seed, carefully germinated and nurtured with love. This 'piece of damaged Eden' is Munro's shelter, and she takes the reader to the mountain, sharing everyday stories, intimate and intricate, of a remote, organic life.

The neighbours are a 'wild bunch' – kangaroos, wallabies, wallaroos, possums, quolls, koalas, bush rats, antechinus and echidnas, frogs, snakes, lizards and leeches, and a colourful, vocal variety of feathered sorts. On a daily basis the author observes the life around her, recounting personalities and performances from the 'non-human society'. Informative but informal, Munro draws you into mountain life. Her delivery is easy and entertaining, and loaded with ethics for good living.

The fibre of the author is that of a seasoned pioneer, resilient and tenacious. She chose 'a life of risk over constant stress' abandoning the mediocrity of the city for self-sufficient living. Her house was lovingly built brick by brick (1474 in total) almost thirty years ago with her own, now arthritic, hands. Each brick was made with tussock grass as straw, and water hand-bucketed from the local spring, 'clear, drinkable and always a wonder'. Then the verandah was added, under the 'Nah Mate Building Standard' and is now shared with a range of indifferent marsupials.

Munro maintains her own water, sewerage and garbage and despite a persistent lack of rapport with things mechanical, she produces her own power. But not without great effort:

Simple life is not found in the country but in the city, where you simply pay your bills and press a button for everything you need, and you don't have to know how any of it works or be able to fix it yourself.

Winner of the Alan Marshall Short Story Award, freelance writer and regular contributor to *Owner Builder* and ABC Radio National's *Bush Telegraph*, Munro's work generally gets classed as 'nature writing' but she doesn't approve of the division into genres by topic: 'If I write about people as a part of nature, what genre is that?' A sense of belonging is central and essential to this story, a theme Munro introduces immediately in her opening sentence 'wherever you live you need to feel safe, and in tune with your surroundings.' Grounded on the mountain, she is acutely aware of neighbourhood nuances, describing her largely un-domestic world as 'unfashionable, timeless and teeming and intensely fascinating'.

Despite her geographic isolation, Munro is a 'vocal local' fiercely committed to the preservation of nature and sustainable living. Her defence of place is loud and passionate and she speaks strongly against local mining developments in the Hunter which devastate landscape, water and air quality – and sicken the locals physically and emotionally. But underlying the author's anguish is a spirit of hope, maintained by highly principled and motivated activists, and young lives:

Many small things I do here are with the future in mind, but a bigger future than my own. Apart from the tree regeneration program, whenever I eradicate a potentially feral garden plant... I feel as if I'm making a will, bequeathing a better place to my descendants, and the world.

Munro's writing emanates strength and courage, and thoughtfulness for tomorrow. Reading her words, you are urged to reconnect with home to nurture a sense of care:

We need to 're-spect', to go back to our roots as well as those of the word – from the Latin specere, to look, so 'to look again'. If we can cast aside our acquired blindness, we might actually see the natural world to which we belong – its richness, diversity and importance beyond ourselves – and regain respect for it.

The Woman on the Mountain is both a cathartic meditation for regeneration and renewal, and a candid conversation. You applaud, gasp and laugh loudly as Munro traverses life's terrain, creating, defending and nourishing her home. You witness the author's enduring relationship with the land – the seasons, elements, inhabitants. And, inspired by her passion, you celebrate place-based living, engagement and care.

A complete treat, this book is daring and heroic. Munro's narrative provides the habitat to re-visit your own ideologies and unfulfilled dreams. She reminds you that it is never too late, but warns that you must plant your seedlings soon to see them grow in your lifetime. The depth of connection to home and ecological integrity in *The Woman on the Mountain* challenges you to re-consider your own choices, and adopt that which is most meaningful and possible. A muse for re-conditioning relationships with place.

MARGIE JENKIN lives in two places: in the foothills of Mount Wellington and on Maria Island National Park where she works as a ranger. Her studies at the University of Tasmania's School of Geography and Environmental Studies included an Honours thesis exploring sense of place through the stories of Tasmanian lighthouse-keepers and their families.