

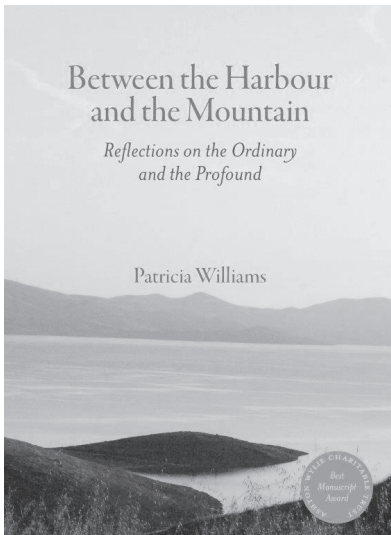
# Book Review

## *Between the Harbour and the Mountain: Reflections on the Ordinary and the Profound.*

By Patricia Williams. (2021). Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Calico.  
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In this beautifully written and elegantly presented book the author, Patricia Williams, offers us her contemplations on the everyday world she encounters, with particular attention to the natural world and its ordinary and wondrous manifestations. Whilst many of us in today's technological age allow our attention to be distracted from the intimate detail of the natural world that enables life on this planet, Williams invites us to notice the extraordinary and sometimes frightening detail of this world within which we are all embedded, indeed intimately interconnected, as she brings her piercingly attentive gaze to the everyday. In doing so Williams reflects upon the meaning she has drawn from her rich and courageous life, allowing us not only to encounter the natural world through her eyes, but also to enter into the mind of a woman,

now formally retired, who has spent her life reflecting upon and engaging with the deep questions of meaning with which we all might grapple, should we have the courage to do so.

This book began its life as journal entries. After her retirement, Williams, as she notes in her introduction to her book, “wanted to write and record my feelings and impressions, most particularly expressions of delight in the ordinary and the magic to be found in the everyday world” (p. 11). Having journalled her reflections on 'the ordinary', initially from her home in Onehunga, and more latterly her home in Mangere Bridge, she then gathered these journal entries together to form this moving and contemplative book. Her thematically organised reflections explore her encounters with the wonders, mysteries, and potentialities of her relationships to people, the natural world, and te ao Māori, and how these relationships and encounters reflect and reveal wider connections to our global context.

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I found her deeply thoughtful musings extremely moving. Every page contains intricate explorations of the microcosms of the natural world that reveal the universe, and the beauty that is before us, if we have but eyes to look, ears to listen, skin to feel, and more than anything, the heart and soul with which to receive and appreciate the wonder that is always around us. If we have the courage to bring such attention to the extraordinary that cradles us, this book reveals how such appreciation might provide us with the joy, as opposed to fear, which might more powerfully motivate us to better care for this planet which is so challenged by our contemporary climate crisis. She invites us to encounter the mysterious beauty of the universe, whether it is revealed in the great kauri tree, Tāne Mahuta, the smallest native bee, the flower of the eucalyptus tree, the delight and degradation of chewing gum, or the kindness of another's heart. Her attention is exquisite; for example,

Yesterday — a miracle! Ambling home from the dairy... I hear a new bird call. I often take a shortcut through my neighbour's large section and, passing a flowering camellia, I hear what seems like a starling imitating a tūi. Sneaking up to the bush, what amazement and delight to see not a starling but a tūi. ...

Today, Tūi (note she no longer is just 'tūi' or 'the tūi' or 'it' but is now a proper noun) is cavorting in an immense oak on the same property. She persistently hounds two eastern rosellas, never letting them settle for more than a few seconds. The huge oak is always abustle with birds — sparrows, starlings, kingfishers, silveryeyes and today the two persecuted rosellas — an avian condominium, in fact. (pp. 93-94)

She contrasts such natural delights with constructions of the human world,

A supermarket is like a church built to honour consumerism: noisy, crass multiplicity of choices, a preacher over the loudspeaker telling the congregation about the latest or cheapest product they need to purchase in order to be blessed. (p. 131)

As she reveals these reflections, Williams also invites us to consider some of the core principles and beliefs that have informed her own rich and meaningful life. In particular, she emphasises her ever-growing appreciation of the depth, unity, and interconnectedness of the universe. She considers how contemporary quantum physics has proven to us all that there is no separation between us and the natural world, between each other, or amongst the many aspects of the universe that is our home. That all is intimately and inevitably interconnected, that each flap of a bee's wing reverberates around the world. She introduces us to her own philosophy and the philosophies of others, which guide us to have faith in the evolutionary possibility that we are continually moving towards recognition of this unity, wholeness, and interconnectedness, "an overall emerging pattern of grace, of wholeness and unity" (p. 33). And underpinning all of this is her faith in the capacity for love. That potent love, not a lip service love of meaningless superficiality, but love that is full of compassionate action, is our greatest hope for a planet facing potential catastrophe.

Love is not an intangible ... abstraction but finds its expression in the compassionate and just way we relate to each other; because without justice love has no meaning.

Love/justice is a steely thing involving the will and often self-sacrifice which applies not only to my nearest and dearest but those with whom I share this land, Aotearoa New Zealand, and this planet, earth. (pp. 217-218)

Underpinning her often profound reflections is this 'steely' determination, that we will face the global catastrophes of the pandemic, of the climate crisis, of potential nuclear horror, with a steely love that seeks justice and a place for all, from the smallest of fruit flies to the largest kauri tree. And woven within the pages of her reflections, are flavours of her deeply thoughtful Christian Catholic faith. Indeed, Williams draws on a range of faith traditions, including Buddhism and Islam, as well as profoundly respectful reflections on the wisdom of te ao Māori. Her faith is not imposed upon us. It is not the faith of a "bearded person called God somewhere up in heaven" (p. 48). Rather, this is a faith, woven throughout the pages of her reflections, in which her theology reflects her conceptualisation of God as love in action.

For many psychotherapists, the concept of God and its relationship with spirituality and with psychotherapy clinical practice, is controversial and often problematic. However, Williams lives in a small community with three other women, all members of NZAP and psychotherapists, and the wisdom of psychotherapy infuses the book. Thus, her theology is both 'steely' and grounded, embracing psychotherapeutic understandings which are woven into her writing, as she offers her version of God as love in action.

For example, she reflects upon her experience of collaborating with one of her accomplices in the creation of a new number for her letterbox, a number six. Eventually they manage to obtain the requisite number, made, appropriately, of steel. It is of considerable size and needs to be powder coated. She and her fellow community member, Cabrini, a psychotherapist, travel off to a dingy Onehunga factory where the powder coating is being completed. When they arrive to receive their freshly minted, powder coated number six, which has taken many hours and considerable labour to prepare, Williams enquires about the cost. One of the two kind men who have done the job, replied,

"Nothing," he says, smiling warmly. "You don't need to pay me anything". I am flabbergasted. ... I feel as if Love has walked in to say, "Hello, I am here. You can find me in unlikely places". I spontaneously reach up (he is tall and I am short) and kiss his cheek. He looks surprised and touched, as am I. We drive off feeling deeply grateful and warmly affected. (p. 101)

Subsequently, Williams reflects on the possible unconscious aspects of this encounter, wondering if she may have evoked in this man,

some positive transference from his mother which moved him to respond to me so caringly? If so, I will never know her, but her influence ripples out, touching me in an unexpected and lovely way. ... my own powerful emotional response was a positive paternal transference from some very early interactions with my father, ... a kindly and loving dad. (p. 102)

At times, Williams reveals how her faith is tested, her hope severely shaken by the horrors of the global terrors that we currently face. The gift of this vulnerability allows the reader to resonate with our parallel fears. Yet, throughout, her reflections are infused with hope. In her epilogue she concludes,

So sombre, so gloomy are my thoughts as I write, and I wonder where is the optimism of the earlier journal entries? ... I hope it is only a temporary absence because the natural world is a living garment enfolding our planet, and I need its comforting and constant presence. For now, whatever else is happening in our human world, the oystercatchers are still flying overhead, the godwits will still gather here in March before leaving on their vast journey to Alaska and Siberia, the magnolia will burst out in July, and in June, the banksia on our verge will again flower to become a feast for thousands of bees and singing tūi. Each morning, Zoe, our neighbour's calico cat, will check out the boundaries of our two properties and our resident blackbirds will express their usual indignation and alarm at her presence. It is assuring to know that in the world of nature, all carry on their routines, regardless.

In contrast to nature, the global upheaval of the pandemic and the potential drastic effects of a changing climate can be overwhelming and drown out the song of the riroriro. This must never happen for we need hope to motivate us to act at this crucial time. (pp. 219-220)

Ultimately, Williams's writing is imbued with hope. For some readers such hope may seem futile in the face of potential devastation. But Williams's hope is steely, without being naïve. As the great Czech statesman and writer Václav Havel wrote in his 1991 book, *Disturbing the Peace*,

Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons, ... The more uncompromising the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breath-taking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from 'elsewhere'. It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. (pp. 181-182)

This is the kind of hope which, for me, infuses Williams's writing.

I recommend this beautiful book most highly. It is a book that can be perused one entry at a time, as a meditative prayer at day's end, or when dawn breaks. Or you may be tempted to read it all in one sitting, allowing each reflection to join the next and to provoke feelings

that stir the heart. And if ever our world needs heart as well as intellectual care and loving action, it is now. Whilst not directly a psychotherapy book, its wisdom, I suggest, would greatly benefit our psychotherapeutic work. Its hopefulness is an antidote to the despair we can so easily feel. Its realism and truth make it both pragmatic and inspiring. And Williams as a guide, allows us not only to encounter the natural world and its beauty and horrors as she encounters it, but also to enter her mind, soul and heart, to feel her subjectivity and the wisdom that might guide us all in sometimes terrifying times.

*Between the Mountain and the Sea: Reflections on the Ordinary and the Profound* (2021), was the winner of the Ashton Wylie Charitable Trust, Best Manuscript Award (Mind, Body, Spirit genre) (2020). It is published by Calico Publishing Ltd, and available for purchase via the publisher's website, [calicopublishing.co.nz](http://calicopublishing.co.nz)

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