

**Peter Stiles, *Trumped By Grace*, (Poetica Christi Press, 2015), \$15, pp. 10-69, ISBN: 978-0-9941640-2-5**

The true poet speaks with a particular voice, articulated in rhythms, rhymes and verbal colours. Peter Stiles' voice carries a stillness that is yet passionate, deeply faithful, but knowing and quietly humorous. The gentle poems in this collection are at home in Australia, but travel easily between the Jewish quarter of Prague, to Assisi, Oxford and New Zealand. They exchange words with other poets and writers from Seamus Heaney to C. S. Lewis, but also artists and musicians from Rembrandt and Dali to Schumann and Duruflé. They live in broad worlds of nature and culture, but hold at their centre the intimate joys of family and friends and the sadness of bereavement.

Stiles is a profoundly Christian poet whose writing glints with an occasional steeliness that echoes the verse of John Donne in its sharp precision and its piercing sense of God's presence and grace known everywhere in the world around us. Underlying it are repeated biblical references and allusions, interwoven with a poet's immediate sensitivities to the world in which we live in both city and in nature and its changing seasons. As T. S. Eliot wrote many years ago, writing religious literature is a difficult and delicate business. It can be overburdened with its own insistence or deafen us with its preachiness. In Stiles there are neither of these things. His poems are written moments caught in the instant of the creative impulse which becomes, in his words, "a moment to savour,/ the wisp of otherness,/ a gasp on the trapeze." It is in the felt life of the language that the energy is communicated and shared in incidents, the sense of place, the love of family, and the presence of God's grace.

For the Christian time is to a large degree governed by the seasons of the liturgical year, above all Christmas and Easter, and these festivals, too, are very much part of these poems. For readers from the northern hemisphere, of course, they are seen in reverse in Australia, their associations of deep winter and emerging spring turned back upon themselves. Yet, as Stiles remarks in his Introduction, "these reversals to the norm afford a fresh perspective", while at the same time, in the spirit of these poems, they hold us in a universal vision so that even "in the heat of summer", "I measure out my life in Christmas trees."

Peter Stiles' poems are jewels to be treasured and lived with.

**David Jasper**  
**Glasgow and Beijing**

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The opening line of " **Grace** ", ( p36), *I am trumped by grace, mocked by love...* provides the title for, and serves as an apt introduction to, this collection. The poem, like the others, is infused with a generosity, acceptance, devotion, a sense of wonder, gratitude – it is after all, conveying *grace*. The poet is *forced to look to God above...whose goodness shines/ through plans and dreams...He hears, your gentle voice, / nuanced and fine...* and *tastes the palate, the colour of premium wine...* Here is a rich, strong, sensory image, *poured into the heart by a loving Lord*. But the poem does not end there. All of this brings the poet to a greater devotion, *your voice brings me back to a wooden cross; all has indeed been trumped by grace*.

These qualities of “**Grace**” point to the other poems. They are comprehensive in scope, covering different places: Sydney ( where the poet lives); the Blue Mountains; the South Coast of NSW; travels throughout New Zealand; Europe; England. They cover the poet’s people: his father, family, grandchildren, places of childhood and earlier career. They cover his reflections on art and literature. They cover the ordinary and the spectacular. There is also a variety of form, with a prose poem and haiku included. In all these, grace spills out into a wide and generous creation, to be gratefully accepted, and the poet invites us to share with him.

For all of the above reasons, this is an exciting collection to read. There is an additional feature, which trumps them all. It is seen in the layers of meaning, the economy and strength of this haiku, (p.42 )

If I reach in through  
The window of my childhood  
The bed is still warm

True, this resonates with the other poems about the poet’s childhood and growing up in country areas, but it is the quality and the strength of the *image* which is the remarkable feature of Peter Stiles’ poetry. This is the real gift of this book. It is a quality evident throughout, proof that *grace* is to be portrayed in clear, specific, sometimes risky and unusual, always glorious and uplifting, language. It is worthy of nothing less! Space will allow just a few examples. From, the moving, “ **Denniston, New Zealand** “ , (p46), *This is an ascension into sadness...* ; “ **New Year’s Eve, 2005** “ , ( p24-25), *...the fault lines run so deep/ in this malignant world.* ; “ **Resurrection Sunday** “ , ( p47 ) , *...the bunting of grace in the shards of cruelty,/ the banner of joy for the grimace of sadness.*

**Trumped by Grace** comes with justifiable recommendations from a number of international academics/poets. These poems *do* invite us to read and meditate. And this book offers something more: for our secularising culture, it offers a winsome statement of imagination derived from *grace*.

**Reviewed by Ian Keast**